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*MODERN ENGLISH WRITERS*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

## MODERN ENGLISH WRITERS.

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any use of the series of Stevenson's *Letters* which have recently been published in a monthly magazine.

With the name of Robert Louis Stevenson is indissolubly connected the name of William Ernest Henley: and I delight to acknowledge, with the liveliest gratitude, the help which Mr Henley has given me in the making of this essay towards a just appreciation of his old comrade. And to John William Simpson, my old master in a noble and difficult art, I would render thanks for the service he did me in sign of our common admiration for Stevenson, the artist.

L. COPE CORNFORD.

OVINGDEAN GRANGE,  
*near* BRIGHTON, *September* 1899.

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## APPARITION.

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*Thin-legged, thin-chested, slight unspeakably,  
Neat-footed and weak-fingered : in his face—  
Lean, large-boned, curved of beak, and touched with race,  
Bold-lipped, rich-tinted, mutable as the sea,  
The brown eyes radiant with vivacity—  
There shines a brilliant and romantic grace,  
A spirit intense and rare, with trace on trace  
Of passion and impudence and energy.  
Valiant in velvet, light in ragged luck,  
Most vain, most generous, sternly critical,  
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist :  
A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,  
Much Antony, of Hamlet most of all,  
And something of the Shorter-Catechist.*

W. E. HENLEY, *Rhymes and Rhythms.*

# ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.



## I.

### PROLOGUE : HIS HERITAGE.

Do you remember—can we e'er forget?—  
How, in the coiled perplexities of youth,  
In our wild climate, in our scowling town,  
We gloomed and shivered, sorrowed, sobbed, and feared?  
The belching winter wind, the missile rain,  
The rare and welcome silence of the snows,  
The laggard morn, the haggard day, the night,  
The grimy spell of the nocturnal town,  
Do you remember?—Ah, could one forget!

—R. L. S., *To my Familiars.*

WHEN Robert Louis Stevenson, some five-and-twenty years since, went to and fro to his studies in the University of that city which was his birthplace and his home, and which always remained to him as the image of “the dear city of Zeus,” the old Scots order, giving place to the new, was even then suffering the last processes

of dissolution. In what the old order consisted, in ancient Edina, a "city of clubs and talk and good-fellowship, a city of harlotry and high jinks, a city (above all) of drink,"<sup>1</sup> it is hard for an Englishman rightly to comprehend. It is odds but he will never attain to a true conception of the old society; he must content himself with mere hints and adumbrations. Let us turn, for instance, to Sir Walter's discreetly<sup>2</sup> jovial pages.

When Colonel Mannering went seeking Mr Pleydell the advocate in Edinburgh, his conductor, the Highland chairman, "suddenly dived with him into a very steep paved lane. Turning to the right, they entered a scale staircase, as it is called, the state of which, so far as it could be judged of by one of his senses, annoyed Mannering's delicacy not a little." It was up this wynd, atop of this foul scale staircase, that the prosperous advocate had his dwelling. But it was Saturday at e'en; and, says the chairman, "His honour will be at Clerihugh's about this time—Hersel could hae tell'd ye that, but she thought ye wanted to see his house." So to Clerihugh's they go accordingly, together

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Henley, *Essay on Robert Burns, &c.*

<sup>2</sup> "Discreetly": I use the word advisedly; for, it was for just such a club as that which Mr Paulus Pleydell presided, that Burns made the famous collection of sculduddery which is known as *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*.

with the great Dandie Dinmont, who "divided the press, shouldering from him, by the mere weight and impetus of his motion, both drunk and sober passengers." The causeway, you observe, is thronged with brither Scots in their accustomed Saturday-at-e'en altitudes. The party turns "into a dark alley—then up a dark stair—and then into an open door . . . Mannering looked around him, and could hardly conceive how a gentleman of a liberal profession and good society should choose such a scene for social indulgence . . . The passage in which they stood had a window to the close, which admitted a little light during the daytime, and a villanous compound of smells at all times, but more especially towards evening." The tavern, in fact, owns premises even more disreputable than the private flat in the "land." And here "men and women, half undressed, were busied in baking, broiling, roasting oysters, and preparing devils on the gridiron"; while, in the next room, Mr Counsellor Pleydell and his fellow-counsellors, highly flushed with claret and brandy, were rioting at "the ancient and now forgotten pastime of *High Jinks* . . . Mr Counsellor Pleydell, such as we have described him, was enthroned, as a monarch, in an elbow-chair placed on the dining-table, his scratch-wig

on one side, his head crowned with a bottle-slider, his eye leering with an expression betwixt fun and the effects of wine, while his court around him resounded with such crambo scraps of verse as these :—

‘Where is Gerunto now? and what’s become of him?  
Gerunto’s drowned because he could not swim, &c., &c.’

Such, O Themis,” adds Sir Walter, “were anciently the sports of thy Scottish children!” Liquor and letters, in fact, but especially liquor.

I have quoted the incident<sup>1</sup> somewhat at length, because it seems to me entirely typical. And observe, that upon the entrance of the visitors, it is the visitors who are dismayed. Mr Pleydell does, indeed, blush “a little”; but Dinmont, the wild Borderer, stands “aghast.” ““Deil o’ the like o’ that ever I saw!”” says he.

And on Sunday morning, behold our reveller in “a nicely-dressed bob-wig, upon every hair of which a zealous and careful barber had bestowed its proper allowance of powder; a well-brushed black suit, with very clean shoes and gold buckles and stock-buckle; a manner rather reserved and formal than intrusive,” walking demurely through the blinded streets (which remained unswept on the Sabbath) to hear and

<sup>1</sup> *Guy Mannering*, vol. ii.

digest, with a solemn and perfectly sincere gusto, a sermon "in which the Calvinism of the Kirk of Scotland was ably supported, yet made the basis of a sound system of practical morals."

Sir Walter, sane, humorous, kindly, is content to do no more than indicate the condition of manners. One may compare the observations of Mr Edward Burt, who "made a tour" in Scotland and the Highlands about the middle of the last century—a feat, in those days, sufficient to justify the writing of a book. "But when persons of fortune will suffer their Houses to be worse than Hog-sties, I do not see how they differ, in that particular, from Hottentots," says the fastidious Englishman. And, "I have often admired at the zeal of a pretty well-dressed Jacobite, when I have seen her go down one of the narrow steep *Wyndes* in *Edinburgh*, through an Accumulation of the worst Kind of Filth, and whip up a blind Stair-case almost as foul, yet with an Air as *degagé*, as if she was going to meet a favourite Lover in some poetic Bower."<sup>1</sup> The Pleydells and Nicol Jarvies of Sir Walter were douce religious citizens; let us set beside their portraits a sketch limned by the elder poet, Allan Ramsay, in his *Elegy on Maggy Johnston, who died anno 1711*.

<sup>1</sup> Burt's *Letters*, 1755.



"To tell the Truth, now Maggy dang,  
 Of Customers she had a bang ;  
 For Lairds and Souters a' did gang  
     To drink bedeen ;  
 The Barn and Yard was aft sae thrang,  
     We took the Green.

And there by Dizens we lay down,  
 Syne sweetly ca'd the Healths arown,  
 To bonny Lasses black or brown,  
     As we loo'd best ;  
 In Bumpers we dull cares did drown,  
     And took our Rest.

When in our Poutch we fand some Clinks,  
 And took a turn o'er *Brunesfield Links*,  
 Aften in Maggy's at Hy jinks,  
     We guz'd Scuds,  
 Till we could scarce, wi' hale out Drinks,  
     Cast aff our Duds.

We drank and drew, and fill'd again,  
 O wow ! but we were blyth and fain ;  
 When ony had their Court mistain,  
     O it was nice  
 To hear us a' cry, Pike your Bain,  
     And spell yer Dice.

For close we us'd to drink and rant,  
 Until we did baith glowr and gaunt,

    . . . . .  
     Right swash I trow ;  
 Then of auld Stories we did cant  
     When we were fou."

And so on, and so forth. The lust of drink,  
 you see, is described in terms of unmistakable

enthusiasm; an enthusiasm whose shadow survives to this day among a certain class in the North, although hard drinking be the fashion there no longer. Drink and talk and secret licence were, it seems, the compensations demanded by human nature for the grievous oppressions of the Kirk, which had long exercised a tyranny nigh impossible of apprehension by the English mind. Some half-century later we find Robert Fergusson (to name but him), Ramsay's direct heir in the descending heritage of letters, versifying upon the old theme. When the Scotch eighteenth-century makers treat of other themes, the result is frequently bald, meaningless, and conventional. But take liquor or sculduddery, and you shall find the Muse, with loins girded and lamp briskly burning, ready to discourse with eloquence and fire.

“Auld Reekie ! thou’rt the canty hole ;  
A bield for mony a cauldrie soul,  
Who snugly at thine ingle loll,  
Baith warm and couth ;  
While round they gar the bicker roll,  
To weet their mouth.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus Fergusson. And—

“An’ frae ilk corner o’ the nation,  
We’ve lasses eke o’ recreation,

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Fergusson, *The Daft Days*.

That at close-mou's tak' up their station  
 By ten o'clock.  
 The Lord deliver frae temptation  
 A' honest fowk !"<sup>1</sup>

The poet is not superfluous to mark the time of day; it was at ten o'clock P.M.—so the disgusted Burt informs us—that the windows were opened, and the refuse of the many-storeyed “lands” was poured bodily into the street.

Although Robert Fergusson died seventy-six years ere Robert Louis Stevenson was born, and although, in the interval, the star of Robert Burns had risen and burned and fallen in ashes, and Sir Walter had founded his imperishable monument, the mention of “Fergusson, our Edinburgh poet, Burns's model,”<sup>2</sup> brings us directly to Stevenson; if only for Stevenson's strange fancy—notorious now to every reader of the daily newspaper—that by some esoteric process of transmigration, whose secret was hidden in the heavens, Fergusson's spirit lived again within him. And as in Robert Burns we have the last expression, the final avatar, of the “old Scots peasant-world,”<sup>3</sup> so, I think, in Robert Louis Stevenson we have

<sup>1</sup> R. Fergusson, *Answer to Mr J. S.'s Epistle*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh*.

<sup>3</sup> “The poor-living, lewd, grimy, free-spoken, ribald, old Scots peasant-world came to a full, brilliant, even majestic close in his work.”—W. E. Henley, *Essay on Robert Burns, &c.*

the consummation of the old Scots middle-class civic tradition—the tradition of letters, of talk, of free-living, and of theology.

Stevenson was born into a city and a time when the old manners and customs and opinions were changing every day, giving place to the “Anglified” modern polity we know; the face of the old city was fast losing its ancient lineaments; and the last of old Edinburgh, observed, when he was still a youth, with Stevenson’s romantic vision and chronicled in his golden phrase, lives very fitly in the pages of his *Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh*. The book is written from the romantic point of view throughout. There was none of that indefinable quality which we have agreed to call romance in Fergusson—none in Allan Ramsay, none (as Mr Henley has demonstrated) in Burns. Realism there was in plenty in these urban poets; but, for romance, we must look to another spiritual ancestor, Sir Walter Scott, the Borderer. And in Stevenson we find the two qualities curiously conjoined. Upon this point, we may note that M. Marcel Schwob has the following observation in an acutely analytical essay, which is even more interesting in the light it throws upon the predilections of the author, as a French contemporary artist profoundly versed

in English literature, than in its "explication" of Stevenson :—

Nous avons trouvé chez bien des écrivains le pouvoir de hausser la réalité par la couleur des mots ; je ne sais pas si on trouverait ailleurs des images qui, sans l'aide des mots, sont plus violentes que les images réelles. Ce sont des images romantiques, puisqu'elles sont destinées à accroître l'éclat de l'action par le décor ; ce sont des images irréelles, puisqu'aucun œil humain ne saurait les voir dans le monde que nous connaissons. Et cependant elles sont, à proprement parler, la quintessence de la réalité.<sup>1</sup>

Upon which there falls one remark to be made—that the "œil humain" of Stevenson *did*, in effect, behold these vivid images.

Who save Stevenson could have written the following description of an Edinburgh relic?—

The tallest of these *lands*, as they are locally termed, have long since been burned out ; but to this day it is not uncommon to see eight or ten windows at a flight ; and the cliff of building which hangs imminent over Waverley Bridge would still put many natural precipices to shame. The cellars are already high above the gazer's head, planted on the steep hill-side ; as for the garret, all the furniture may be in the pawn-shop, but it commands a famous prospect to the Highland hills. The poor man may roost up there in the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Schwob, "R. L. S.," *New Review*, February 1896.

centre of Edinburgh, and yet have a peep of the green country from his window ; he shall see the quarters of the well-to-do fathoms underneath, with their broad squares and gardens ; he shall have nothing overhead but a few spires, the stone top-gallants of the city ; and perhaps the wind may reach him with a rustic pureness, and bring a smack of the sea, or of flowering lilacs in the spring . . . Times are changed. In one house, perhaps, two score families herd together ; and, perhaps, not one of them is wholly out of the reach of want. The great hotel is given over to discomfort from the foundation to the chimney-tops ; everywhere a pinching, narrow habit, scanty meals, and an air of sluttishness and dirt. In the first room there is a birth, in another a death, in a third a sordid drinking bout, and the detective and the Bible-reader cross upon the stairs . . . One night I went along the Cowgate after every one was abed but the policeman, and stopped by hazard before a tall *land*. The moon touched upon its chimneys, and shone blankly on the upper windows : there was no light anywhere in the great bulk of building ; but as I stood there it seemed to me that I could hear quite a body of quiet sounds from the interior ; doubtless there were many clocks ticking, and people snoring on their backs. And thus, as I fancied, the dense life within made itself faintly audible in my ears, family after family contributing its quota to the general hum, and the whole pile beating in tune to its timepieces, like a great disordered heart . . . It is true that over-

population was at least as dense in the epoch of lords and ladies, and that nowadays some customs which made Edinburgh notorious of yore have been fortunately pretermitted . . . But an aggregation of comfort is not distasteful like an aggregation of the reverse [not thus would that adventurous traveller, Mr Burt, have written]. Nobody cares how many lords and ladies, and divines and lawyers, may have been crowded into these houses in the past—perhaps the more the merrier . . . [But], the Bedouins camp within Pharaoh's palace-walls, and the old war-ship is given over to the rats. We are already a far way from the days when powdered heads were plentiful in these alleys, with jolly, port-wine faces underneath . . .<sup>1</sup>

A far way indeed, O graceful moralist! were it only by the modern touch observable in every line of your picture, we should remember that. A far way, but the end of the road is near; and the sentimental youth who stands elegantly moralising beneath the "stone top-gallants" of the immemorial city, savouring the tang of the sea that lies beyond, with a vagrant thought upon the "flowering lilacs in the spring," is presently to decorate, with a surprising variety of charming sculptures, the cenotaph of Old Scotland.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh*.

## II.

## HIS ANCESTRY.

Peace and her huge invasion to these shores  
 Puts daily home ; innumerable sails  
 Dawn on the far horizon and draw near ;  
 Innumerable loves, uncounted hopes  
 To our wild coasts, not darkling now, approach :  
 Not now obscure, since thou and thine are there,  
 And bright on the lone isle, the foundered reef,  
 The long, resounding foreland, Pharos stands.  
 —R. L. S., *To my Father. Underwoods.*

As I have tried to indicate, however lightly, the drift of that broad tide in human affairs which shaped the destinies of Robert Louis Stevenson, so I would endeavour to trace, as briefly as possible, the influences which flowed to him by the directer current of heredity. In his little history, *A Family of Engineers*, and his portrait of *Thomas Stevenson*,<sup>1</sup> himself has told us all that we need to know.

Alan Stevenson, great-grandfather of Robert

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits.*



Louis, and his brother Hugh, were West Indian merchants, Alan managing the business at home, Hugh abroad. Both brothers died young; and Alan left a widow, and a son, Robert Stevenson. The bereaved wife, Jean, was the daughter of one David Lillie, "a builder in Glasgow, and several times 'Deacon of the Wrights'"; and so in him we note a craftsman linked to that family which was presently to be renowned throughout the world for cunning craftsmanship. When her son Robert was fifteen, Jean Lillie married Thomas Smith, merchant burgher of Edinburgh; and thus we come to a second craftsman, who was also something of an inventor, and something of a commercial force.

He appears [says Stevenson] as a man, ardent, passionate, practical, designed for affairs and prospering in them far beyond the average. He founded a solid business in lamps and oils, and was the sole proprietor of a concern called the Greenside Company's Works . . . He was also, it seems, a shipowner and underwriter. He built himself "a land"—Nos. 1 and 2 Baxter's Place, then [within the present century] no such unfashionable neighbourhood—and died, leaving his only son in easy circumstances, and giving to his three surviving daughters portions of five thousand pounds and upwards. There is no standard of success in life [remarks the biographer]; but in one of its meanings, this is to succeed.

In 1786 Thomas Smith was appointed engineer to the newly-formed Board of Northern Lighthouses (the superiority of his proposed lamp and reflectors over open fires of coal secured his appointment); and thus begins the famous tradition which indissolubly connects the name of Stevenson with sea-lights and beacons all the world over. For Robert Stevenson, Thomas Smith's stepson, became the engineer's assistant, and later his partner, and in due time, "by an extraordinary arrangement, in which it is hard not to suspect the managing hand of a mother, Jean Smith became the wife of Robert Stevenson." The women of this double household, we are told, were immersed in such extremes of piety that the men—scrupulous, godly, honest, industrious, even heroical souls as they were—appear to have depressed these elect females as something worldly. That strange, artificial cleavage between things human and things divine, which the English mind (consciously or unconsciously) rejects as something deformed, begins already to appear in the Stevensonian annals. Cunning of brain and art of hand already contrive to co-exist with arrogant theology; and in the mind of Robert Stevenson, the real founder of the family, a fine working compromise was effected, such a compromise as may so often be

observed in kindly, simple natures, unaffectedly in love with their calling. Were it not for such gentle, illogical reasonableness, the world must surely have ceased to spin upon its axis long ago. Robert Stevenson did a man's work in the world, and left an enduring inheritance.

The seas into which his labours carried the new engineer were still scarce charted, the coasts still dark; his way on shore was often far beyond the convenience of any road; the isles in which he must sojourn were still partly savage. He must toss much in boats; he must often adventure on horseback by the dubious bridle-track through unfrequented wildernesses; he must sometimes plant his lighthouse in the very camp of wreckers; and he was continually exposed to the vicissitudes of out-door life. The joy of my grandfather in this career [continues R. L. S. with an evident access of sympathy] was strong as the love of woman. It lasted him through youth and manhood, it burned strong in age, and at the approach of death his last yearning was to renew these loved experiences. What he felt himself he continued to attribute to all around him. And to this supposed sentiment in others I find him continually, almost pathetically, appealing: often in vain.

In 1807, upon the retirement of his stepfather, Thomas Smith, Robert Stevenson became sole engineer to the Board of Northern Lights; and the same year he began the building of the

Bell Rock Lighthouse. Himself has written the history of that notable achievement; and his grandson has appended an abridgment to his *Family of Engineers*. It is enough for my purpose to remark, in this narration, the old man's constant delight in the picturesque side of his work, a delight which was only subordinate to the indefatigable industry and unsleeping vigilance of a master-craftsman; an industry and a vigilance which carried to accomplishment an extremely hazardous task, extending over four years, without a single mishap which might have been foreseen or prevented. Here, for instance, is an extract from Robert Stevenson's journal, in which he preserved a very full and minute record of these laborious years:—

The incident just noticed [says the engineer—that of the waves pouring suddenly upon his head, over the new walls, then fifty-eight feet high, of the rising lighthouse]—the incident just noticed did not create more surprise in the mind of the writer than the sublime appearance of the waves as they rolled majestically over the rock. This scene he greatly enjoyed while sitting at his cabin-window; each wave approached the beacon like a vast scroll unfolding; and in passing discharged a quantity of air, which he not only distinctly felt, but was even sufficient to lift the leaves of a book which lay before him.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Family of Engineers*.

With this same vision would his grandson have looked forth of the cabin-window; in the same spirit—though not precisely in the same terms—would he have chronicled his observation.

And again:—

To windward, the sprays fell from the height above noticed [sixty-four feet above the rock] in the most wonderful cascades, and streamed down the walls of the building in froth as white as snow. To leeward of the lighthouse the collision or meeting of the waves produced a pure white kind of *drift*; it rose about thirty feet in height, like a fine downy mist, which in its fall felt upon the face and hands more like a dry powder than a liquid substance.<sup>1</sup>

Compare his grandson's description of the breakers—"the Merry Men"—in the Roost of Aros:—

On such a night, . . . he peers upon a world of blackness, where the waters wheel and boil, where the waves joust together with the noise of an explosion, and the foam towers and vanishes in the twinkling of an eye . . . The fury, height, and transiency of their spoutings was a thing to be seen and not recounted. High over our heads on the cliff rose their white columns in the darkness; and at the same instant, like phantoms, they were gone. Sometimes three at a time would thus aspire and vanish; sometimes a

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Family of Engineers*.

gust took them, and the spray would fall about us, heavy as a wave.<sup>1</sup>

Every stone of that tall building on the Bell Rock, which with the leaping waves makes so fine a picture to the architect, as he sits observant at his cabin-window, was cut out with his own hands "in the model; and the manner in which the courses were fitted, joggled, trenailed, wedged, and the bond broken, is intricate as a puzzle and beautiful by ingenuity." And the same artist "grew to be the familiar of members of Parliament, judges of the Court of Session, and 'landed gentlemen'; learned a ready address, had a flow of interesting conversation, and when he was referred to as 'a highly respectable *bourgeois*,' resented the description."<sup>2</sup> With all that, "no servant of the Northern Lights came to Edinburgh but he was entertained at Baxter's Place to breakfast. There, at his own table, my grandfather sat down delightedly with his broad-spoken homespun officers."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Inspector of Lighthouses, Robert Stevenson shows himself, in his reports and letters, as an unflinching martinet; he was "king in the service to his finger-tips. All should go in his way, from

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Merry Men*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *A Family of Engineers*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

. . . and though he read little, was constant to his favourite books . . . Lactantius, Vossius, and Cardinal Bona were his chief authors . . . When he was indisposed, he had two books, *Guy Mannering* and *The Parent's Assistant*, of which he never wearied . . . The Church of Scotland, of which he held the doctrines (though in a sense of his own [mark the saving clause]) and to which he bore a clansman's loyalty, profited often by his time and money . . . His sense of his own unworthiness I have called morbid; morbid, too, were his sense of the fleetingness of life and his concern for death. He had never accepted the conditions of man's life or his own character; and his inmost thoughts were ever tinged with the Celtic melancholy . . . His talk, compounded of so much sterling sense and so much freakish humour, and clothed in language so apt, droll, and emphatic, was a perpetual delight to all who knew him before the clouds began to settle on his mind. His use of language was both just and picturesque; and when at the beginning of his illness he began to feel the ebbing of this power, it was strange and painful to hear him reject one word after another as inadequate, and at length desist from the search and leave his phrase unfinished rather than finish it without propriety. It was perhaps another Celtic trait that his affections and emotions, passionate as these were, and liable to passionate ups and downs, found the most eloquent expression both in words and gestures. Love, anger, and indignation shone

the building of Skerryvore, the noblest of all extant deep-sea lights.”<sup>1</sup> The tradition, so nobly begun, was nobly carried forward; the firm of Stevenson “were consulting engineers to the Indian, the New Zealand, and the Japanese Lighthouse Boards, so that Edinburgh was a world-centre for that branch of applied science.”<sup>2</sup>

Upon the character of Thomas Stevenson I cannot do better than quote the words of his son, Robert Louis. It is curious to note, in that portrait, the mingled features of his father who was before him, and those of his son, Robert Louis, who came after him, and whose works we know.

He was a man [says Stevenson] of a somewhat antique strain: with a blended sternness and softness that was wholly Scottish, and at first somewhat bewildering; with a profound essential melancholy of disposition and (what often accompanies it) the most humorous geniality in company; shrewd and childish; passionately attached, passionately prejudiced; a man of many extremes, many faults of temper, and no very stable foothold for himself among life's troubles. Yet he was a wise adviser; many men, and these not inconsiderable, took counsel with him habitually . . . He had excellent taste, though whimsical and partial

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



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through him and broke forth in imagery, like what we read of in Southern races.<sup>1</sup>

And when Stevenson is writing *Treasure Island*, he tells us that his "father caught fire at once with all the romance and childishness of his original nature. His own stories, that every night of his life he put himself to sleep with, dealt perpetually with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travellers before the era of steam."<sup>2</sup> And this, be it noted, was the man who "wrote also in defence of Christianity, and his work was highly praised by many learned authorities. His *Layman's Sermon* is to be found in a volume of his *Life and Work*."<sup>3</sup>

Altogether a striking figure; one to command respect, to call forth affection and admiration. And when Thomas Stevenson married the daughter of Dr Balfour the divine, an ingredient of theology again tinctures the family strain, and again from the female side.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Essays and Fragments*.

<sup>3</sup> E. Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*.

<sup>4</sup> And there came more than that. At past sixty, after a lifetime of conventional Edinburgh, this lady broke up the house in Heriot Row, removed herself and her belongings to Apia, learned to ride bare-backed and to go bare-footed, and took on the life at

"Now I often wonder," says Stevenson, discoursing in his pleasantly egoistic vein, "what I have inherited from this old minister. I must suppose, indeed, that he was fond of preaching sermons, and so am I, though I never heard it maintained that either of us loved to hear them."

Well, it may seem to us now, looking back upon the history of the country of his birth, and the mingled character of his ancestors, that a scion of the nature of Robert Louis Stevenson might have been predicted with some assurance. We have the old Scottish tradition of letters, free-living, and theology; the first and last elements, the love of learning and of theology, are marked in the Stevensonian line; the second element, of (what I have called) free-living, seems counteracted by a strong and religious character; we have, in addition, in the Stevensons and the Smiths, the inherited faculty of invention, the romantic bias, the insight into character, the delight in words for their own sake, and, above all, the austere devotion, as a point of honour, to perfect craftsmanship.

Assume, for the nonce, that the Stevenson

Vailima and the life of Tusitala's native friends with equal gusto and intelligence. Stevenson was fond of calling himself a tramp and a gipsy; and that he could do so with justice was owing to the fact that his mother was Margaret Balfour.

whom we know through his work is strangely compounded of these elements; a thesis which it is my business to exemplify in the pages that follow: assume, I say, that he had a certain scholarship, and loved preaching, and romance, and the infinite diversity of the creature; that with a keen vision and a faculty of ingenious invention he joined incomparable workmanship: assume all this, and I must still remark two main distinctions betwixt Stevenson and his immediate forebears.

And first, in the records of the engineers his forefathers, we find no trace of, what are called, irregular courses of life, which are among the commonest influences of the time in which they lived and worked. But, how should Stevenson, such as he was, born into the last decaying period of the old order of things, escape its influence? I cannot but think that the old Scottish grossness, how transfigured and decorated soever, reappears in the gruesome and ugly elements of which he makes such striking use in his work.

And for my second distinction: these engineers were men of strong body, who, in health and vigour, accomplished an amazing amount of work. "He sought health in his youth in the Isle of Wight," says Robert Louis Stevenson,

gossiping of his mother's father, "and I have sought it in both hemispheres; but whereas he found and kept it, I am still on the quest."

He was still, courageous seeker, upon the quest when death took him; and in considering his work, with all its brilliancy and variety and charm, we must still bear in mind that it is the work of a man of frail constitution, often beset by sickness, often indomitably toiling—indeed, so intense was his need of self-expression, that I had almost written "amusing himself"—in the very clutch of the enemy.

## III.

## OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE.

Say not of me that weakly I declined  
 The labours of my sires, and fled the sea,  
 The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,  
 To play at home with paper like a child.  
 But rather say: *In the afternoon of time*  
*A strenuous family dusted from its hands*  
*The sand of granite, and beholding far*  
*Along the sounding coast its pyramids*  
*And tall memorials catch the dying sun,*  
*Smiled well content, and to this childish task*  
*Around the fire addressed its evening hours.*  
 R. L. S., *Underwoods.*

There never came a Fool out of Scotland.

*Old Saw.*

ROBERT LEWIS BALFOUR STEVENSON, the only child of Thomas Stevenson, civil engineer, and Margaret Isabella his wife, youngest daughter of James Balfour, minister of the parish of Colinton in Mid-Lothian, was born on the 13th of November 1850, at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh. From about his eighteenth year he chose to sign himself Robert Louis Steven-

son.<sup>1</sup> Robert Louis seems to have been a child of a vain, delicate, and excitable temperament, suffering frequently from illness; and, not less frequently, from the penalties of a romantic imagination. As his works, both by accident and design, reflect and chronicle the history of himself from stage to stage of his career in a manner peculiarly his own among writers, so we may learn all we need to know of his childhood—the childhood of a born romantic—as of his later life, from his own verses and essays. Hence, in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *Child's Play*, *Random Memories*, *The Manse*, *Id. Plain*, *2d. Coloured*, and *A Chapter on Dreams*, we seem to disengage the picture of an eager, frail little boy, with remarkable eyes, lustrous and brown, dwelling largely in a world of his own invention; loving to read, or to hear read, books of the romantic order; and even desirous, with infantine zeal, to write them. Mr Sidney Colvin tells us that “A ‘History of Moses,’ dictated in his sixth year, and an account of ‘Travels in Perth’ in his ninth, are still extant;”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Louis*, because there was a certain Bailie extant whose political opinions revolted young Stevenson's soul, and whose surname was (insolently) Lewis. But Stevenson's friends continued to pronounce his name Lewis to the end.

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., “Stevenson, Robert Louis.”

and in Miss E. Blantyre Simpson's account of Stevenson's childish days<sup>1</sup> we find him engaged one winter, together with his cousin, R. A. M. Stevenson, with a series of adventures which happened upon a fabulous island. Robert Louis's island was called Noseingdale, the island of R. A. M. Stevenson, Encyclopædia, and each chieftain illustrated his island's history. Many children begin so, it is true, and afterwards they change. The point is, that as it was in the beginning with Stevenson, so it was with him to the end.

In May, 1857, Mr and Mrs Stevenson, after an intermediate sojourn of four years at No. 1 Inverleith Terrace, took up their abode at 17 Heriot Row, which remained the family headquarters until the death of Thomas Stevenson in 1887. When he was eight years old, the boy Robert Louis was put to a preparatory school kept by a Mr Henderson, in India Street, where he remained for two or three years; in his eleventh year he began an attendance at the Edinburgh Academy ("a junior rival to the High School where Scott was educated"<sup>2</sup>), which lasted, at intervals, for some time. Here

<sup>1</sup> E. Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



he started a school magazine in manuscript, *The Sunbeam*, which seems to have been almost entirely written, edited, and illustrated by himself.<sup>1</sup> When he was thirteen he went for a few months to a boarding-school kept by a Mr Wyatt at Spring Grove, near London. Coming home again to Edinburgh, he was sent next year to Mr Thompson's private school in Frederick Street, where he remained until his seventeenth year. And here, in his fifteenth year, he showed to his schoolmate Baildon a drama based upon the history of Deacon Brodie, the genesis of the play written, fourteen years later, in collaboration with Mr Henley.<sup>2</sup> Would we learn what manner of schoolboy was little Robert Louis, we may turn to his own description:—

Many writers [he says] have vigorously described the pains of the first day or the first night at school; to a boy of any enterprise I believe they are more often agreeably exciting. Misery—or at least misery unrelieved—is confined to another period, to the days of suspense and the “dreadful looking-for” of departure; when the old life is running to an end, and the new life, with its new interests, not yet begun; and to the pain of an imminent parting, there is added

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<sup>1</sup> E. Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

the unrest of a state of conscious pre-existence. The area railings, the beloved shop-window, the smell of semi-suburban tan-pits, the song of the church-bells upon a Sunday, the thin high voices of compatriot children in a playing-field—what a sudden, what an overpowering pathos breathes to him from each familiar circumstance! The assaults of sorrow come not from within, as it seems to him, but from without. I was proud and glad to go to school; had I been let alone I could have borne up like any hero; but there was around me, in all my native town, a conspiracy of lamentation: "Poor little boy, he is going away—unkind little boy, he is going to leave us"; so the unspoken burthen followed me as I went, with yearning and reproach. And at length, one melancholy afternoon in the early autumn, and at a place where it seems to me, looking back, it must be always autumn and generally Sunday, there came suddenly upon the face of all I saw—the long empty road, the lines of the tall houses, the church upon the hill, the woody hillside garden—a look of such a piercing sadness that my heart died; and seating myself on a door-step, I shed tears of miserable sympathy. A benevolent cat cumbered me the while with consolations—we two were alone in all that was visible of the London Road: two poor waifs who had each tasted sorrow—and she fawned upon the weeper, and gambolled for his entertainment, watching the effect, it seemed, with motherly eyes.

For the sake of the cat, God bless her! I confessed at home the story of my weakness . . . It was judged,

if I had thus brimmed over on the public highway, some change of scene was (in the medical sense) indicated; my father at the time was visiting the harbour lights of Scotland; and it was decided that he should take me along with him around a portion of the shores of Fife; my first professional tour, my first journey in the complete character of man, without the help of petticoats.<sup>1</sup>

Doubtless some change of scene—in the medical sense—was indicated; but no migration might change the acutely sensitive, romantically sentimental, egoistic temperament, which was able, not only to receive so vivid and picturesque an impression in early boyhood—a faculty which is, after all, no uncommon characteristic of that golden age—but, to retain it for some years in all its pristine freshness, and then gracefully to set the memory in words. And with that excursion to Fife, Robert Louis Stevenson's education may be said to have begun; from that time forth, from choice or necessity, he became a traveller and a wanderer. And so, while he was yet at Mr Thompson's school, he made "frequent visits to health-resorts in Scotland; occasional excursions with his father on his nearer professional rounds—*e.g.*, to the coasts and lighthouses of Fife in 1864; and also

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Random Memories*.

longer journeys—to Germany and Holland in 1862, to Italy in 1863, to the Riviera in the spring of 1864, and to Torquay in 1865 and 1866;”<sup>1</sup> and although we learn, also, that he enjoyed the privilege of instruction from private tutors upon most of these occasions, it was then, as always, the things which lay aside from the common road of knowledge which counted in his education. We have his own (oft-quoted) statement of the matter: “All through my boyhood and youth I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet,” he adds, “I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write.”<sup>2</sup> At the age of seventeen Robert Louis Stevenson was entered as a student at Edinburgh University; and during the time of his attendance at the classes there, we have the same story: “Indeed, I denied myself many opportunities; acting upon an extensive and highly rational system of truancy, which cost me a great deal of trouble to put in exercise—perhaps as much as would have taught me Greek—and sent me forth into the world and the profession of letters with the merest shadow of an education.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., “Stevenson, Robert Louis.”

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

"At the same time," says Mr Colvin, "he read precociously and omnivorously in the *belles-lettres*, including a very wide range of English poetry, fiction, and essays, and a fairly wide range of French."<sup>1</sup> Later in life, he devoted much time to the study of the history of the Highlands, French history of the fifteenth century, and to the records of the First Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington. At the time when Robert Louis left school, his father bought Swanston Cottage, which, lying in the Pentland Hills, three miles from Edinburgh, became the country residence of the family. Here Stevenson made acquaintance with John Todd, the shepherd, as related in the *Pastoral*; <sup>2</sup> and it was from John Todd, I am told, that he acquired at first-hand much of his knowledge of the classic vernacular. Originally intended for the family profession, Stevenson, while at the University, was at first a pupil of Fleeming Jenkin, Professor of Engineering, whose biography, in course of time, he came to write.

Here is an extract from the *Memoir* of that singular, admirable being, Fleeming Jenkin, which discovers to us (as biographies are apt

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., "Stevenson, Robert Louis."

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

to do) at least as much of the author as of his hero.

I was inclined [says Stevenson] to regard any professor as a joke, and Fleeming as a particularly good joke, perhaps the broadest in the vast pleasantry of my curriculum. I was not able to follow his lectures; I somehow dared not misconduct myself, as was my customary solace; and I refrained from attending. This brought me at the end of the session into a relation with my contemned professor that completely opened my eyes. During the year, bad student as I was, he had shown a certain leaning to my society; I had been to his house; he had asked me to take a humble part in his theatricals; I was a master in the art of extracting a certificate even at the cannon's mouth; and I was under no apprehension. But when I approached Fleeming I found myself in another world; he would have naught of me. "It is quite useless for *you* to come to me, Mr Stevenson. There may be doubtful cases, there is no doubt about yours. You have simply *not* attended my class." The document was necessary to me for family considerations; and presently I stooped to such pleadings and rose to such adjurations as make my ears burn to remember. He was quite unmoved; he had no pity for me. "You are no fool," said he, "and you chose your course." I showed him that he had misconceived his duty, that certificates were things of form, attendance a matter of taste. Two things, he replied, had been required for graduation: a certain competency

proved in the final trials, and a certain period of genuine training proved by certificate ; if he did as I desired, not less than if he gave me hints for an examination, he was aiding me to steal a degree. "You see, Mr Stevenson, these are the laws and I am here to apply them," said he. I could not say but that this view was tenable, though it was new to me ; I changed my attack : it was only for my father's eye that I required his signature, it need never go to the Senatus, I had already certificates enough to justify my year's attendance. "Bring them to me ; I cannot take your word for that," said he. "Then I will consider." The next day I came charged with my certificates, a humble assortment. And when he had satisfied himself, "Remember," said he, "that I can promise nothing, but I will try to find a form of words." He did find one, and I am still ashamed when I think of his shame in giving me that paper. He made no reproach in speech, but his manner was the more eloquent ; it told me plainly what a dirty business we were on ; and I went from his presence, with my certificate indeed in my possession, but with no answerable sense of triumph. That was the bitter beginning of my love for Fleeming ; I never thought lightly of him afterwards.<sup>1</sup>

This little story strikes the English reader, unused to the traditions of a Scottish university, with a mild amaze. A student, bone-idle and quite irresponsible, comes, first to demand, and

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*.

then to beg, from his professor a certificate of attendance at classes which he did not attend. It is necessary to him, he says, for family considerations—not a new proposition, but sufficiently intelligible. The student is astonished to find that his professor considers himself in justice bound to refuse that prayer. Thereupon he pleads with the professor as with one labouring under singular misconceptions; and he actually prevails; and, finally, when he writes that professor's memoir many years afterwards, he cites the whole incident (careless of his own character) as an example of the extraordinary probity (or what?) of the said professor.

The summer vacations of Stevenson's eighteenth and two following years were devoted to visiting the works of his father's firm, which were in progress at various points on the Scottish coast.

And all the while [he says, when upon one of these expeditions] I was aware that this life of sea-bathing and sun-burning was for me but a holiday. In that year cannon were roaring for days together on French battlefields; and I would sit in my isle (I call it mine, after the use of lovers) and think upon the war, and the loudness of these far-away battles, and the pain of the men's wounds, and the weariness of their marching. And I would think too of that other war which is as



old as mankind, and is indeed the life of man: the unsparing war, the grinding slavery of competition; the toil of seventy years, dear-bought bread, precarious honour, the perils and pitfalls, and the poor rewards. It was a long look forward; the future summoned me as with trumpet-calls, it warned me back as with a voice of weeping and beseeching; and I thrilled and trembled on the brink of life, like a childish bather on the beach.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever these sentiments denote, they hardly denote the point of view of the heaven-born engineer, such as the essayist's father and grandfather were before him.

This was [he says in another place] when I came as a young man to glean engineering experience from the building of the breakwater. What I gleaned, I am sure I do not know; but indeed I had already my own private determination to be an author; I loved the art of words and the appearances of life; and *travellers*, and *headers*, and *rubble*, and *polished ashlar*, and *pierres perdues*, and even the thrilling question of the *string-course*, interested me only (if they interested me at all) as properties for some possible romance or as words to add to my vocabulary . . . My only industry was in the hours when I was not on duty . . . Then it was that I wrote *Voces Fidelium*, a series of dramatic monologues in verse; then that I indited

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

the bulk of a Covenanting novel—like so many others, never finished.<sup>1</sup>

Plainly, this dilettante young man was not made of the fibre which the generations of Stevensons had been accustomed to look for in the making of a civil engineer.

I was educated [he says, in a letter to a friend] for a civil engineer on my father's design, and was at the building of harbours and lighthouses, and worked in a carpenter's shop and a brass foundry, and hung about wood-yards and the like. Then it came out I was learning nothing, and, on being tightly cross-questioned during a dreadful evening walk, I owned I cared for nothing but literature. My father said that was no profession, but I might be called to the Bar if I chose. At the age of twenty-one I began to study law.<sup>2</sup>

From childhood, Stevenson had been constantly writing: writing verse, and essays, and romances and plays, and imitations—everything—for the sake of practice in literary gymnastic. Of these studies, *The Pentland Rising*, written in the author's sixteenth year, was first published as a pamphlet (which, as he increased in renown, became a treasure desired of collectors), and again, among the collected works in the

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*.

Edinburgh Edition, together with two or three other juvenile pieces. (It is curious, and encouraging to the aspirant, to note how little natural facility of expression is manifested in it. There is nothing in the essay to distinguish it from the performance of any other bookish youth of sixteen; and that one born so "weak-fingered" should eventually attain to the mastery of a singular opulence of diction, argues fine qualities of perseverance and tenacity of mind—"broken tenacity of mind" is his own expression.<sup>1</sup> Among all the perplexities and changing aims and fancies of youth, he seems to have held an unswerving course to this one clear bourne—he would learn to write.) He read for the Bar, and in due time, at the age of five-and-twenty, "on 14th July 1875, he passed his final examination with credit, and was called to the Bar on the 16th";<sup>2</sup> but all the legal erudition was by the way. During the four or five years from the time he abandoned the engineering profession to his call to the Bar, Stevenson was really graduating, in many ways, for the profession of letters. To begin with, he was still writing, and again writing, and always writing.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Vailima Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., "Stevenson, Robert

I must have had some disposition to learn [he says of himself—confidential as usual—at this period of his life], for I clear-sightedly condemned my own performances. I liked doing them indeed; but when they were done, I could see they were rubbish. In consequence, I very rarely showed them even to my friends; and such friends as I chose to be my confidants. I must have chosen well, for they had the friendliness to be quite plain with me. “Padding,” said one. Another wrote: “I cannot understand why you do lyrics so badly.” No more could I! Thrice I put myself in the way of a more authoritative rebuff, by sending a paper to a magazine. These were returned; and I was not surprised, or even pained. If they had not been looked at, as (like all amateurs) I suspected was the case, there was no good in repeating the experiment; if they had been looked at—well, then I had not yet learned to write, and I must keep on learning and living.<sup>1</sup>

One remarks, first of all, the admirable seriousness with which the apprentice takes his chosen trade. Names are familiar to us whose owners were authors of repute, and glibly earning quite comfortable little incomes at an age when Stevenson is still “clear-sightedly” (and probably with perfect justice) condemning his own performances; and yet, in the end, he has outstripped the most of his contemporaries.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

But, one remarks in addition, that the aspirant has begun at last to suspect that the manner of literature is not entirely and absolutely everything necessary to the perfect author, but that the matter, also, counts for a little: "I must keep on learning and *living*," he says.

And it was during those four or five years of his life, from his twentieth year to his twenty-fifth, that the Stevenson whom we know upon the narrow stage of literary history was making himself. In the beginning of these years, to the vain, introspective, hyper-sensitive youth of *The Pentland Rising*, *The Wreath of Immortelles*, and the rest—the valetudinarian boy who spent much of his time in the seclusion of his bed-chamber, heaped about with manuscripts—there came his cousin, the same with whom he had once played at the game of magic islands in the nursery, Mr R. A. M. Stevenson, recently emancipated from the University of Cambridge. Mr R. A. M. Stevenson was the elder of the two, and he forthwith undertook (it seems) the education of his cousin Louis, in the modern city where the dying light of the old order still smouldered among discredited ashes.

To know what you like [says Stevenson, writing in middle life,] is the beginning of wisdom and of old age.

Youth is wholly experimental. The essence and charm of that unquiet and delightful epoch is ignorance of self as well as ignorance of life. These two unknowns the young man brings together again and again, now in the airiest touch, now with a bitter hug ; now with exquisite pleasure, now with cutting pain ; but never with indifference, to which he is a total stranger, and never with that near kinsman of indifference, contentment. . . . It is not beauty that he loves, nor pleasure that he seeks, though he may think so ; his design and his sufficient reward is to verify his own existence and taste the variety of human fate.<sup>1</sup>

And in verifying his own existence and tasting the variety of human fate—whatever these expressions may connote—did Stevenson, together with his senior, spend the next two or three years : a period whose inner records were written in the sand, and survive not the waves of time.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

<sup>2</sup> Mr Colvin's reference to these years (*Dictionary of National Biography*, art., "Stevenson, Robert Louis") is, perhaps, a little misleading. No doubt the differences of which they were compounded were not all reputable. But it was a time of walking and canoeing as well as of drink and "jink" and the "L. J. R." (that mysterious and strange society!) ; and it took our author out of himself, it brought him face to face with life and character, it taught him to be something other than the "sedulous ape" of some one else, and (for his intimates were all talkers and moralists) it initiated and developed a practice of discussion and debate which left no theme of speculation unattempted nor many unexhausted.  
—W. E. H.

Among his friends at this period were Mr Charles Baxter, the late Sir Walter Grindlay Simpson, Fleeming Jenkin, and James Walter Ferrier. Later, he came to know Mr Sidney Colvin; and, a year or two afterwards, in the early days of 1875, he first met Mr W. E. Henley, who was then a patient in the Edinburgh Old Infirmary. In the lines which I am so fortunate as to be allowed to print at the beginning of this volume, Mr Henley has delineated Robert Louis Stevenson as he knew him, in the beginning of a friendship which lasted long.

And in his essay on *Talk and Talkers* (the first series) Stevenson has left a picture of the society of his friends. Their identity is masked under pseudonyms in the text; but the matter is an open secret; and there is now no breach of confidence in discovering *Burly* as Mr W. E. Henley, *Spring-Heel'd Jack* as Mr R. A. M. Stevenson, *Athelred* and *Cockshot* as the late Sir W. G. Simpson and Fleeming Jenkin. In this society Stevenson learned to talk; and it is upon record that he became a proficient in the art. At this time, too, he was a member of the Edinburgh Speculative Society.

The Speculative Society [he says] is a body of some antiquity, and has counted among its members Scott, Brougham, Jeffrey, Horner, Benjamin Constant,

Robert Emmet, and many a legal and local celebrity besides. By an accident, variously explained, it has its rooms in the very buildings of the University of Edinburgh: a hall, Turkey-carpeted, hung with pictures, looking, when lighted up at night with fire and candle, like some goodly dining-room; a passage-like library, walled with books in their wire cages; and a corridor with a fireplace, benches, a table, many prints of famous members, and a mural tablet to the virtues of a former secretary. Here a member can warm himself and loaf and read; here, in defiance of the *Senatus-consults*, he can smoke.<sup>1</sup>

And here it was that the *Edinburgh University Magazine* was founded by James Walter Ferrier, Robert Glasgow Brown, Stevenson himself, and another. Stevenson contributed six papers to the magazine, which are included in the Edinburgh edition. The sixth, and last, *An Old Scots Gardener*, is included in his *Memories and Portraits*. The piece is highly tentative; but to us (who know, 'tis true, the sequel) it seems to carry a promise of much greater things. It is,

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*. And, "In the early seventies," says Miss Simpson, "Louis was twice president of the 'Speculative.' He wrote several papers for this society: *The Influence of the Covenanted Persecution on the Scottish Mind* (1871); *Notes on 'Paradise Lost'* (1872); *Notes on the Nineteenth Century*, *Two Questions in the Relations between Christ's Teaching and Modern Christianity* (1873); *Law and Free Will—Notes on the Duke of Argyll*."



at least, a considerable advance on the earlier attempts included in the *Juvenilia*.

Stevenson first appeared before the greater world in a little essay on *Roads*, which, after being refused by the *Saturday Review*, was published in the *Portfolio* for December 1893, and which was signed *L. S. Stoneven*.<sup>1</sup> By this time he had visited London, and had there become acquainted with writers whose names are familiar to us. And, by this time, in the intervals of his legal studies, he was already at work upon the first of those essays which were afterwards collected under the title of *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*. In 1875, in his twenty-fifth year, he went to France for a time, to the forest of Fontainebleau, where Mr R. A. M. Stevenson was then living in the painter-settlements. The visit was the first of several, and in his *Fontainebleau*<sup>2</sup> (and, incidentally, in *The Wrecker*) he has made a picture of these "village communities of painters"; and there is in Paris a certain café, which owns a little room lined with paintings and opening upon the river, where M. Stevenson is still remembered.

<sup>1</sup> E. Blantyre Simpson, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh Days*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

The charm of Fontainebleau [he says] is a thing apart. It is a place that people love even more than they admire. The vigorous forest air, the silence, the majestic avenues of highway, the wilderness of tumbled boulders, the great age and dignity of certain groves—these are but ingredients, they are not the secret of the philtre. The place is sanative; the air, the light, the perfumes, and the shapes of things concord in happy harmony. The artist may be idle and not fear the “blues.” He may dally with his life . . . I was for some time a consistent Barbizonian; *et ego in Arcadia vixi*; it was a pleasant season; and that noiseless hamlet lying close among the borders of the wood is for me, as for so many others, a green spot in memory. The great Millet was just dead; the green shutters of his modest house were closed; his daughters were in mourning. The date of my first visit was thus an epoch in the history of art: in a lesser way it was an epoch in the history of the Latin Quarter. The *Petit Cénacle* was dead and buried; Murger and his crew of sponging vagabonds were all at rest from their expedients; the tradition of their real life was nearly lost; and the petrified legend of the *Vie de Bohême* had become a sort of gospel, and still gave the clue to zealous imitators.<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of the same year, 1875, Stevenson was called to the Bar, had a brass door-plate (at 17 Heriot Row) engraved with the legend “Robert Louis Stevenson, Advocate,” and began

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

to pace the Parliament House in the mornings, according to the Scots custom in use among briefless advocates. Among the legal fry of Scotland, to whom he was known as "The Gifted Boy," Stevenson seems to have walked apart and solitary, nursing his soul. At this point, one may observe that he was never popular in his native city. The society of Edinburgh courted him not, neither in his inglorious youth, nor his middle age of renown. "Edinburgh" . . . he says, "is a metropolitan small town; where college professors and the lawyers of the Parliament House give the tone, and persons of leisure, attracted by educational advantages, make up much of the bulk of society."<sup>1</sup> He was not of that society, and that society knew it, as he knew it. Indeed, it is probable that the little fellowship I have enumerated made the whole of his visiting acquaintance in Edinburgh. Since the facts are common property, I need have no scruple in referring to them. The coteries which had been accustomed to regard the Stevenson family with respect and esteem, declined to recognise the wilful eccentric who elected to drive down Princes Street (that classic thoroughfare) clothed in boating flannels and a straw hat, upon a summer's

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*.

afternoon;<sup>1</sup> whose chosen attire in mid-winter was a pork-pie hat embroidered with silver, a velvet jacket, and a Spanish cloak;<sup>2</sup> who wore his hair curling below the bottom of his advocate's wig; who attended evening parties in a blue-black flannel shirt; and who (it is upon record) delighted to outrage the decorous conventions which govern "Anglified" Edinburgh.

Stevenson did not waste overmuch time in the Parliament House. If he ever held a brief, which seems doubtful, he held but one; for by this time he was fast wedded to literature. And, in 1876, we behold the Scot emancipated. In the publication of the *Virginibus Puerisque* essays, Stevenson emerges at last from the difficult obscurity of his long probation, and unfurls his flag upon the capital city of his own peculiar country. The years have done their work; by what way soever the young man travelled to his

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Moyes Black, *R. Louis Stevenson*.

<sup>2</sup> He came to an informal evening in these garments, and, in their removal, appeared in a dress-coat, a blue flannel shirt, a knitted tie, pepper-and-salt trousers, silk socks, and patent leather shoes (he was exceeding vain of his foot, which was neat and elegant). His hair fell to his collar; he waltzed, he talked, he exploded, he was altogether wonderful. And the women (this would have touched him, had he known it) were in fits of laughter till—a whole Romantic Movement in his cloak and turban—he departed. To dream (it may be) over a sentence of Sir Thomas Browne's and a gin-and-ginger at Rutherford's.—W. E. H.

own, he came to his own at last. As he was born a Stevenson and a Balfour, so he was born a theologian, a moralist, and a sectary—in a word, a “Shorter Catechist.” And a Shorter Catechist he remains to the end, though he came to wear his rue with a difference. In the *Virginibus Puerisque* essays, which might well be called, as the author thought at first of calling them, *Life at Twenty-Five*, the sectary has broken his bonds and cast away his cords, has faced to the right-about, and is found laying down the law in gay contradiction. He is still, you observe, promulgating morality—a morality with a difference—still a theologian and a moralist; and, to the last day of his life, the “Shorter Catechist” with inextinguishable zest, was employed in finding and formulating a rule of conduct—for himself and others, and for others still more than himself. And *Virginibus Puerisque*, of which I shall have more to say, contains work of Stevenson’s which remains unsurpassed by anything achieved by the artist in later life; and from that point he went straight forward.

In the spring of this year (1876), he made the canoe trip through Belgium with Sir Walter Simpson, as related in *An Inland Voyage*; and in the autumn he travelled in the Cevennes, as related in the *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*.

Neither of these two excellent little books brought profit to their author, nor did they, at the first, extend his fame beyond the immediate circle of his friends. During this year, also, Stevenson contributed to the *Academy*, *Vanity Fair*, and *London*, a weekly review founded in Sir Walter Simpson's rooms by Robert Glasgow Brown, and invented largely, if not wholly, by Stevenson and W. E. Henley. Soon afterwards, upon Brown's untimely death at Mentone, Mr Henley succeeded to the conduct of the journal; and it was during his reign that Stevenson contributed to *London* the brilliant series of *The New Arabian Nights*: a series which was supposed, by more than one of the proprietors of *London*, sufficiently to account for the unpopularity of their paper. Meanwhile, the essays of *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, and Stevenson's first published stories, *A Lodging for the Night* (*Temple Bar*), *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* (*Temple Bar*), and *Providence and the Guitar* (*London*), had appeared. About this time, also, the play *Deacon Brodie* was written in collaboration with Mr Henley; and when he was seven- or eight-and-twenty, Stevenson wrote *Will o' the Mill*, which remains, to the mind of the present writer at least, his highest achievement in literature. And early in 1879

(in his twenty-ninth year), while he was still in Edinburgh, he drafted (as Mr Colvin tells us), "but afterwards laid by, four chapters on ethics (a study to which he once referred as being always his 'veiled mistress') under the name of *Lay Morals*," which have been included in the Edinburgh Edition.

In the summer of the same year, Stevenson found himself compelled to differ from his father upon the crucial question of his marriage; and, in consequence of that unfortunate difference, he was left, for the first time, to gain his living by his own exertions. As yet, as I have said, outside the minority of persons interested in literature, the work of Stevenson, brilliant and personal as it was, went almost unregarded; and the prospects of the young author, who had by this time finally abandoned the law, were highly discouraging. The lady, an American by birth, whom he desired to make his wife, Mrs Osbourne (*née* Van de Grift), and whose acquaintance he had made in France, had returned to California. To the West, then, Stevenson resolved to go; and thither he went, travelling as an emigrant, by emigrant ship and emigrant train—a rude but satisfying experience for a romantic gentleman nurtured in comfort, and suffering from uncertain health. Thus did

he begin those travels and voyages which landed him at last, a lifelong exile, upon that "ultimate island" where he died. In *The Amateur Emigrant* he has written of his experiences:—

As I walked the deck and looked round upon my fellow-passengers, . . . I began for the first time to understand the nature of emigration. Day by day throughout the passage, and thenceforward across all the States, and on to the shores of the Pacific, this knowledge grew more clear and melancholy. Emigration, from a word of the most cheerful import; came to sound most dismally in my ear.

It came, indeed, to sound most dismally ere the author arrived at his journey's end, for the misery and discomfort set a heavy strain upon his frail constitution. But he spent his time in making acquaintance with his fellow-passengers, in studying them, and sitting down to moralise his observations on paper, and making picturesque notes of the voyage, until the deserts are crossed, and "few people have praised God more happily than I did," he says. And—

The day was breaking as we crossed the ferry; the fog was rising over the citted hills of San Francisco; the bay was perfect—not a ripple, scarce a stain, upon its blue expanse; everything was waiting, breathless,



for the sun. A spot of cloudy gold lit first upon the head of Tamalpais, and then widened downward on its shapely shoulder; the air seemed to awaken, and began to sparkle; and suddenly

“The tall hills Titan discovered,”

and the city of San Francisco, and the bay of gold and corn, were lit from end to end with summer daylight.

The Amateur Emigrant knows how to write a piece of description—a landscape in sunrise—you perceive. Nevertheless, he had but scant success in obtaining work upon the American journals. “On the whole, his work was not thought up to Californian standards,”<sup>1</sup> says Mr Colvin, with cutting irony. During the eight months which Stevenson spent “partly at Monterey and partly at San Francisco,”<sup>2</sup> he fell a victim to one of those severe attacks of illness to which he was thenceforward liable; yet, with the strenuous courage which was a main virtue of Stevenson’s character, he “managed, nevertheless, to write the story of *The Pavilion on the Links*, two or three essays for the *Cornhill Magazine*, . . . a first draft of the romance of *Prince Otto*, and the two parts of *The Amateur Emigrant*.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., “Stevenson, Robert Louis.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

In the meantime, Mrs Osbourne had obtained a divorce from her husband; and in the spring of 1880, when Stevenson was in his thirty-first year, Mrs Van de Grift was married to him. With the boy Samuel Lloyd Osbourne, Mrs Stevenson's son, the two went to live for a time at Juan Silverado, the site of an old mining-camp above Calistoga, in the Californian coast range. Here, from *The Silverado Squatters*, is Stevenson's description of the place:—

For about a furlong we followed a good road along the hillside through the forest, until suddenly that road widened out and came abruptly to an end. A cañon, woody below, red, rocky, and naked overhead, was here walled across by a clump of rolling stones, dangerously steep, and from twenty to thirty feet in height. A rusty iron chute on wooden legs came flying, like a monstrous gargoyle, across the parapet. It was down this that they poured the precious ore; and below here the carts stood to wait their lading, and carry it mill-ward down the mountain. The whole cañon was so entirely blocked, as if by some rude guerilla fortification, that we could only mount by lengths of wooden ladder, fixed in the hillside. These led us round the farther corner of the clump; and when they were at an end we still persevered over loose rubble and wading deep in poison-oak, till we struck a triangular platform, filling up the whole glen, and shut in on either hand by bold projections

of the mountain. Only in front the place was open like the proscenium of a theatre, and we looked forth into a great realm of air, and down upon tree-tops and hill-tops, and far and near on wild and varied country. The place still stood as on the day it was deserted : a line of iron rails with a bifurcation ; a truck in working order ; a world of lumber, old wood, old iron ; a blacksmith's forge on one side, half-buried in the leaves of dwarf madronas ; and on the other, an old brown wooden house . . .<sup>1</sup>

How Stevenson and his wife and stepson lived in that old brown wooden house for several sunny months, may be read at length in *The Silverado Squatters*. Meanwhile, the family difference before referred to was brought to a happy conclusion, and in August of the same year, 1880, the Stevensons came home to Scotland. Six weeks later, for health's sake, they went to Davos. Here they made acquaintance with John Addington Symonds (the *Opalstein* of *Talk and Talkers*) and his family ; and here it was that Stevenson and his stepson amused themselves by designing, and printing upon a little press of their own, such trifles as the *Not I, and other Poems*, the *Black Canyon*, the *Moral Emblems*, now included in the supplementary volume to the Edinburgh Edition.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Silverado Squatters*.

In May of next year, 1881, the Stevensons again returned to Scotland, living, for four months, at Pitlochry and Braemar. At this time Stevenson wrote [*Thrawn Janet*], one of the grisliest of his short stories, and a first draft of *The Merry Men*. In August, acting in part upon the advice of the retiring Professor of History and Constitutional Law in Edinburgh, Sheriff Æneas Mackay, he became a candidate for the vacant chair; but his candidature was declined. And at this time also he began *Treasure Island*, which remains, in some ways, the best of his longer works, even as its writing marked a definite stage in his career.

It was far indeed from being my first book, for I am not a novelist alone [says he, writing in a popular magazine some twelve years later]. But I am well aware that my paymaster, the Great Public, regards what else I have written with indifference, if not aversion . . . Sooner or later, somehow, anyhow, I was bound to write a novel. It seems vain to ask why . . . although I had attempted the thing with vigour not less than ten or twelve times, I had not yet written a novel. All—all my pretty ones—had gone for a little, and then stopped inexorably like a schoolboy's watch. I might be compared to a cricketer of many years' standing who should never have made a run . . . In the fated year I came to live with my father and mother at . . . Braemar.

There it blew a good deal and rained in a proportion ; my native air was more unkind than man's ingratitude, and I must consent to pass a good deal of my time between four walls in a house lugubriously known as the Late Miss McGregor's Cottage. And now admire the finger of predestination. There was a schoolboy<sup>1</sup> in the Late Miss McGregor's Cottage, home from the holidays, and much in want of "something craggy to break his mind upon." He had no thought of literature ; it was the art of Raphael that received his fleeting suffrages ; and with the aid of pen and ink and a shilling box of water-colours, he had soon turned one of the rooms into a picture-gallery. My immediate duty towards the gallery was to be showman ; but I would sometimes unbend a little, join the artist (so to speak) at the easel, and pass the afternoon with him in a generous emulation, making coloured drawings. On one of these occasions I made the map of an island ; it was elaborately and (I thought) beautifully coloured ; the shape of it took my fancy beyond expression ; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets ; and, with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance "Treasure Island" . . . No child but must remember laying his head in the grass, staring into the infinitesimal forest and seeing it grow populous with fairy armies. Somewhat in this way, as I paused upon my map of "Treasure Island," the future character of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods ; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Lloyd Osbourne.

me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection. The next thing I knew I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters . . . It seems as though a full-grown experienced man of letters might engage to turn out *Treasure Island* at so many pages a day, and keep his pipe alight. But, alas ! this was not my case. Fifteen days I stuck to it, and turned out fifteen chapters ; and then, in the early paragraphs of the sixteenth, ignominiously lost hold. My mouth was empty ; there was not one word of *Treasure Island* in my bosom ; and here were the proofs of the beginning already waiting me at the "Hand and Spear." Then I corrected them, living for the most part alone, walking on the heath at Weybridge in dewy autumn mornings, a good deal pleased with what I had done, and more appalled than I can depict to you in words at what remained for me to do. I was thirty-one ; I was the head of a family ; I had lost my health ; I had never yet paid my way, never yet made £200 a-year ; my father had quite recently bought back and cancelled a book<sup>1</sup> that was judged a failure : was this to be another and last fiasco ? I was indeed very close on despair ; but I shut my mouth hard, and during the journey to Davos, where I was to pass the winter, had the resolution to think of other things and bury myself in the novels of M. du Boisgobey. Arrived at my destination, down I sat one morning to the unfinished tale ; and behold ! it flowed from me like

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<sup>1</sup> *The Amateur Emigrant.*

small-talk ; and in a second tide of delighted industry, and again at the rate of a chapter a-day, I finished *Treasure Island*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the author, writing, in the days of his success, of the days when he was yet unknown to fame. These confidential reminiscences seem better fitted for the pages of a private letter than for the columns of a popular magazine. But there these records are ; and, such as they are, we find them interesting, and significant of the writer's character. The singular lack of reticence which induced a man of letters of Stevenson's eminence thus to respond to the request of a popular magazine for a piece of private history, and the curious fitful working—the "broken tenacity"—of a mind whose talent lay always in dealing with episode, never with a lengthy and complicated narrative, which are here revealed, discover to us two essential characteristics of the man's temperament.

Stevenson finished *Treasure Island* at Davos during the winter of 1881-82 ; in the following summer he returned to Scotland, whence he journeyed south for the winter, taking up his quarters near Marseilles. In January 1883 he removed his household to a *châlet*, "Châlet la Solitude," near Hyères. Meanwhile *Treasure*

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*, &c.

*Island* had run its serial course in *Young Folks' Paper* (at thirty shillings a chapter, I am told), and had appeared as a volume. The book made Stevenson's first popular success<sup>1</sup>—one of those sudden, extraordinary popular successes which so often perplex and confound the critical; but, in this case, every one bought the book for the adequate reason that it was good story, brilliantly told.

While he lived in the south, Stevenson wrote the *Treasure of Franchard*, a short story which seems, to me, to express one aspect of a many-sided temperament as completely as *Will o' the Mill* gives expression to another; and *The Black Arrow*, a story of adventure written to succeed *Treasure Island* in *Young Folks' Paper*. The readers of *Young Folks' Paper*, it is said, cared little for *Treasure Island*; but they were thought to like *The Black Arrow*.

In the eyes of readers who thought less than nothing of *Treasure Island* [says the author, in one of those dedications which afford a perennial pleasure to read], *The Black Arrow* was supposed to mark a clear advance. Those who read volumes and those who read story papers belong to different worlds. The verdict on *Treasure Island* was reversed in the other court: I wonder, will it be the same with its successor?

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<sup>1</sup> It enchanted the proprietor of *The Times*, and drew a post-card from Mr Gladstone.



The verdict was reversed—so variable a thing is the thermometer of popular taste. At this time, also, Stevenson was writing essays for *The Cornhill* (in which periodical the *Virginibus Puerisque* series had first appeared), and for *The Magazine of Art*, which was then edited by Mr Henley. He was, also, preparing for serial publication *Prince Otto*, which had been drafted two or three years before. His work suffered an interruption during almost the whole of the ensuing year, 1884, for, while still in the south, Stevenson was again attacked by serious illness; and returning to England, he settled in the autumn at Bournemouth. There, in divers lodgings, he wrote the first and best of his *Child's Garden*, together with his share of *Beau Austin* and *Admiral Guinea*. And then, early in 1885, his father presented him with the house in which he lived until 1887, and which he called Skerryvore, after the noble and beautiful lighthouse designed and built by his uncle, Alan Stevenson.

For love of lovely words, and for the sake  
Of those, my kinsmen and my countrymen,  
Who early and late in the windy ocean toiled  
To plant a star for seamen, where was then  
The surfy haunt of seals and cormorants :  
I, on the lintel of this cot, inscribe  
The name of a strong tower.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Underwoods*.

The while he dwelt in Skerryvore, "he was never," says Mr Colvin, "free for many weeks together from fits of hæmorrhage and prostration." At this time, again, it seems that he must work under the disabilities of the invalid. Nevertheless, he continued to pursue his vocation with "unfaltering and delighted industry." In this year (the thirty-fifth of his age) he completed *The Child's Garden of Verses*, and stringently revised *Prince Otto* (it had been written six or seven times ere it got into *Longman's Magazine*<sup>1</sup>) before the final appearance of the story as a volume. He began *The Great North Road*, a promising fragment which is included in the Edinburgh Edition; he wrote, with Mrs Stevenson, the second series of *The New Arabian Nights*; he wrote sundry essays; several Christmas stories—stories, that is to say, which appeared in Christmas numbers of various periodicals—*The Body Snatcher* (not republished), *Olalla*, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*, and *Markheim*; and about this period he and Mr Henley remodelled *Deacon Brodie* and wrote

<sup>1</sup> And, even after so much revision, there may be found in the text of *Longman's Magazine* a deal of blank verse: which leads us to remark that blank verse written in the place of prose is, not necessarily the result of careless workmanship (as some have vainly dreamed), nor even of fatigue but, merely the natural outcome of strong emotion.

*Robert Macaire*. His books, meanwhile, had brought him scant increase of fame or profit. (Mr Colvin tells us that, until 1886, his thirty-sixth year, Stevenson had never earned much more than £300 a-year: a record one would commend to the literary aspirant for his particular consideration.) But, in 1886, he achieved a second popular victory, in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. That extraordinary little work incidentally appealed, not only to that side of the British temperament which demands entertainment but, to the moral, or religious, element inherent in the national character,—that element to which no appeal, high or low, righteous or fantastic or hysterical, is ever wholly vain. The clergy at large espied another opportunity for pressing a secular phenomenon into the service of the sanctuary; and *Dr Jekyll* was captured and turned to great account as a pulpit metaphor. And there was one ingenious gentleman at least, who, living at Bournemouth, profited by a number of sermons which he never heard. For, every one bought and read *Dr Jekyll*; and, together with *Kidnapped*, reprinted from *Young Folks' Paper* about the same time, the little book considerably increased Stevenson's reputation. His name, as such, became of monetary value, a signature coveted of pub-

lishers; and, from henceforth, his income was largely augmented.

Of Stevenson's comrades of Edinburgh days, days from which, by time and chance and change, he was already far removed, several had gone the way of all men; in *Old Mortality*, he had already commemorated James Walter Ferrier; and now, in 1886, he came to write the biography of Professor Fleeming Jenkin. Then, in May of the following year, his father died; and the death of Thomas Stevenson made one of the reasons which sent him upon his second long exile, which his own death ended. His ill-health made another; and, says Mr Colvin, "his wife's connections pointing to the west, he thought of Colorado, persuaded his mother to join them, and with his whole household—mother, wife, and stepson—sailed for New York on 17 Aug. 1887." At first the family stayed at Newport, then they settled for a time at Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks, then Stevenson came to New York for a little while, and then, leaving the city, he "went for some weeks boating to Manasquan on the New Jersey coast."<sup>1</sup> During this time, from August 1887 to May 1888, he had written *Ticonderoga*,

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., "Stevenson, Robert Louis."

and a series of twelve essays for *Scribner's Magazine*, had begun *The Master of Ballantrae*, and had completed, together with his stepson Mr Lloyd Osbourne, the narrative farce, *The Wrong Box*.

Writing to Mr Colvin upon the aspect of *Pulvis et Umbra* and the didactic pieces among the *Scribner* essays, Stevenson says: "I agree with you the lights seem a little turned down; the truth is I was far through, and came none too soon to the South Seas, where I was to recover peace of body and mind. And however low the lights, the stuff is true."<sup>1</sup> If the lights were low, they burned with radiance—a radiance which can only be described as lurid; but as to that I shall have more to say. And, in a fragment of an essay, written four or five years later, the author tells us how he came to begin *The Master of Ballantrae*, that sinister, disjointed, powerful work:—

I was walking one night in the verandah of a small house in which I lived, outside the hamlet of Saranac. It was winter; the night was very dark; the air extraordinary clear and cold, and sweet with the purity of forests. From a good way below, the river was to be heard contending with ice and boulders: a few lights

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Across the Plains*.

appeared, scattered unevenly among the darkness, but so far away as not to lessen the sense of isolation. For the making of a story here were fine conditions. I was, besides, moved with the spirit of emulation, for I had just finished my third or fourth perusal of *The Phantom Ship*. "Come," said I to my engine, "let us make a tale, a story of many years and countries, of the sea and the land, savagery and civilisation; a story that shall have the same large features, and may be treated in the same summary elliptic method as the book you have been reading and admiring" . . . There cropped up in my memory a singular case of a buried and resuscitated fakir, which I had been often told by an uncle of mine, then lately dead, Inspector-General John Balfour.

On such a fine frosty night, with no wind and the thermometer below zero, the brain works with much vivacity; and the next moment I had seen the circumstance transplanted from India and the tropics to the Adirondack wilderness and the stringent cold of the Canadian border. Here then, almost before I began my story, I had two countries, two of the ends of the earth involved; and thus though the notion of the resuscitated man failed entirely on the score of general acceptation, or even (as I have since found) acceptability, it fitted at once with my design of a tale of many lands; and this decided me to consider further of its possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in the spring of 1888 (when Stevenson

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*, &c.

was in his thirty-eighth year), comes Mr S. S. McClure, the American publisher, offering Stevenson £2000 to cruise in the South Seas, and to write the story of his voyages in a series of letters. He accepted the offer; and in June the Stevenson family set sail from San Francisco in the schooner yacht *Casco*, Captain Otis, for the Marquesas Islands; thence to the Paumotus; thence to the Society Islands; and thence northward to Honolulu. The whole cruise lasted about six months. Here, from *The Wrecker* (which work was begun at sea about this time), is Stevenson's picture of his first sailing into those desired waters:—

I love to recall the glad monotony of a Pacific voyage, when the trades are not stinted, and the ship, day after day, goes free. The mountain scenery of trade-wind clouds, watched . . . under every vicissitude of light—blotting stars, withering in the moon's glory, barring the scarlet eve, lying across the dawn collapsed into the unfeatured morning bank, or at noon raising their snowy summits between the blue roof of heaven and the blue floor of sea; the small, busy, and deliberate world of the schooner, with its unfamiliar scenes, the spearing of dolphin from the bowsprit end, the holy war on sharks, the cook making bread on the main hatch; reefing down before a violent squall, with the men hanging out on the foot-ropes; the squall itself, the catch at the heart, the opened sluices

of the sky ; and the relief, the renewed loveliness of life, when all is over, the sun forth again, and our outfought enemy only a blot upon the leeward sea. I love to recall, and would that I could reproduce that life, the unforgettable, the unrememberable. The memory, which shows so wise a backwardness in registering pain, is besides an imperfect recorder of extended pleasures ; and a long-continued wellbeing escapes (as it were, by its mass) our petty methods of commemoration. On a part of our life's map there lies a roseate, undecipherable haze, and that is all.

Of one thing, if I am at all to trust my own annals, I was delightedly conscious. Day after day, in the sun-gilded cabin, the whisky-dealer's thermometer stood at 84°. Day after day the air had the same indescribable liveliness and sweetness, soft and nimble, and cool as the cheek of health. Day after day the sun flamed ; night after night the moon beacons, or the stars paraded their lustrous regiment. I was aware of a spiritual change, or, perhaps, rather a molecular reconstitution. My bones were sweeter to me. I had come home to my own climate, and looked back with pity on those damp and wintry zones miscalled the temperate.<sup>1</sup>

The Stevensons remained at Honolulu for some six months, and during this time Stevenson made a visit to the leper island of Molokai. From Honolulu they set sail upon

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Wrecker*.



a second cruise, just a year from the time they started from San Francisco.

Hence [says Stevenson], lacking courage to return to my old life of the house and sick-room, I set forth to leeward in a trading schooner, the *Equator*, of a little over seventy tons, spent four months among the atolls (low coral islands) of the Gilbert group, and reached Samoa towards the close of '89. By that time gratitude and habit were beginning to attach me to the islands; I had gained a competency of strength; I had made friends; I had learned new interests; the time of my voyages had passed like days in fairyland; and I decided to remain.<sup>1</sup>

So, for another six months, the *Equator* tramps among the islands, visiting the Gilberts, and fetching up about Christmas time, 1889, at Apia near Samoa, where the Stevensons stayed for some weeks. Here Stevenson bought an estate of some four hundred acres, and called it Vailima; and here he wrote *The Bottle Imp*, the first of his Pacific yarns. Thence, they sailed to Sydney, where Stevenson, falling ill again, lost for a time his new-found health. While at Sydney, he wrote the *Open Letter*<sup>2</sup> (printed in that *Scots Observer*, which, during its conduct by Mr Henley, established a new

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *In the South Seas*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

tradition in literature, in criticism, and in journalism; and contended, single-handed, for certain ideals which the nation, though it draws from changed sources which claim the inspiration as their own, is at last adopting) to the Reverend Dr Hyde of Honolulu in which that clergyman receives an unsparing castigation. Dr Hyde had—or Stevenson thought he had, for, after all, the matter seems a shade doubtful—written a letter to a brother ecclesiastic, containing gross imputations upon the character of Father Damien, the leper evangelist, which awoke Stevenson to vengeful indignation, and moved him to produce a piece of capital invective.

A happier reminiscence of Sydney, for whose record I am indebted to the kindness of Mr Rudyard Kipling, remains in the letters addressed by Mr Alan Breck Stuart to one Terence Mulvaney. The fame of the said Terence Mulvaney has reached Mr Stuart (he says) even in that antipodean city; Mr Mulvaney is in the service, as it appears to Mr Stuart, of a man with a strange name, to whom (Mr Stuart is of opinion) he was sent directly from the Almighty. To this flattering effusion Mr Mulvaney responded in suitable terms; whereupon Mr Stuart incontinently despatches a cartel to Mr Mul-

vanev: he challenges him to make music or to fight—to pipes or broadswords—or both; and if both, then the pipes first and broadswords after, or broadswords first and (if the parties survive) pipes after; just whichever Mr Mulvaney pleases; although—so far as Mr Stuart is able to make out—Mr Mulvaney is not of the *duaine-uasal* (*Anglicé*, of gentle rank), nor does he hold His Majesty's commission; and therefore, he is scarce of a rank with Alan Breck, who bears a king's name. Nevertheless, having in mind Mr Mulvaney's indubitable prowess, and the fact of his bearing honourable service to the man of the strange name aforesaid, Mr Stuart, for the pleasure of meeting Mr Mulvaney, is willing (as he says) to overlook these disabilities.

From Sydney, in April 1890, the Stevensons sailed again in the trading steamer *Janet Nicoll*. Aboard the *Janet Nicoll*, Stevenson began the series of letters for Mr McClure, which were eventually published in the New York *Sun*, and, in England, in *Black and White*, selections from them being presented in the Edinburgh Edition in *In the South Seas*. They exhibit the Scot abroad in a somewhat dreary aspect. They are picturesque and skilfully written, as all of Stevenson's work must be; yet the author seems wilfully to ignore all of Polynesian life which might not have

been set forth by a missionary discoursing at a tea-party. It is hard to believe that *In the South Seas* was written by the same hand which indited the earlier Stevensonian essays and stories—the hand, even, that wrote *The Beach of Falesá* about the same time. In truth, it is likely that a vision of more humane and catholic comprehension was requisite in dealing with the Islanders than was possessed by the “Shorter Catechist” in his austerer middle age. Instead of the man whose eyes have been opened, it is “John Calvin come alive again,” and patrolling the isles of the blest.

During the summer of 1890, the *Janet Nicoll* carried the Stevensons from Sydney and Auckland to the Penrhyn Islands, thence to the Union Islands, the Ellice Islands, and northward to the Gilbert and Marshall Islands, thence back again by New Caledonia, Sydney, and Auckland to Apia, where they landed in September. There, upon his estate of Vailima, Stevenson settled with his family. During his voyages, he had completed *The Master of Ballantrae*, had written sundry verses (included in *Songs of Travel*), two dreary ballads of Polynesian legend, *The Song of Rahéro* and *The Feast of Famine*, had produced (at Samoa) *The Bottle Imp*, and (at Sydney) the *Letter to Dr*

*Hyde*, had begun the *South Sea Letters*, and, with Mr Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker*. When he entered upon his residence at Samoa the *Letters* and *The Wrecker* were still unfinished; while upon the new estate there were clearing and planting, and the completion of the house to be superintended; and how he settled down to cope with these labours, may be read at large in the *Vailima Letters* addressed to Mr Sidney Colvin, and published in the Edinburgh Edition. In the following spring (1891), Mrs Stevenson the elder became a member of the Stevensonian household; Stevenson's step-daughter, Mrs Strong, had joined the party two years before; and thus, with his mother, wife, stepdaughter, and stepson, with two serious tasks to complete, an estate to lay out and a house to build, we behold Stevenson cheerfully entering upon those four arduous years in the Pacific which were the last of his life.

At first, his health seemed almost entirely restored to him, and he accomplished a really amazing amount of work without distress. He writes for six or eight hours a-day, pioneers his estate, rides, boats, and lavishly entertains the island population generally, both brown and white. They called him Tusitala, the teller of tales; and indeed, albeit his knowledge of South

Sea life and the South Sea tongues was never more than a smattering, he liked to pose as a kind of a bard, and feudal chieftain. And in the summer of 1891, when the political troubles of the island, the offspring of German officialism and native intrigue, began to threaten war, Stevenson, plunging gaily into that vexed and complicated business, drew his sword upon the side of the oppressed in his letters to *The Times*.<sup>1</sup> There was none to outvie the practised writer in that exercise; and, in consequence of his exposures, the three treaty Powers (Great Britain, the United States, and Germany) were constrained to withdraw from their protectorate the Chief Justice, Mr Cedercrantz, and the President of the Council, Baron Senfft von Pilsach. The whole story of shifty diplomacy and native civil war may be read in Stevenson's *Footnote to History*, a monograph which, on the top of all his other enterprises, he thought it his duty to undertake during 1892; and a curious and instructive work it is. The methods of the historian and of the novelist, as Stevenson himself somewhere observes, are often, ultimately, very much the same; and the professional historian, ostensibly recording chronicles, sometimes sets forth what is neither more nor less than a novel

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Letters from Samoa*.

in disguise. And, in *A Footnote to History* we observe the professional novelist engaged in writing history in little, with results highly characteristic of the writer.

In 1891 *The Wrecker* was completed, and, later in the year, the *South Sea Letters*. Besides writing the *Footnote to History* during the ensuing year, Stevenson began *Catriona*, the sequel to *Kidnapped*, which had been written six years before; *The Ebb-Tide*, in collaboration with Mr Lloyd Osbourne; *Heathercat*,<sup>1</sup> *The Young Chevalier*,<sup>1</sup> *Weir of Hermiston*,<sup>1</sup> and *A Family of Engineers*,<sup>2</sup> a short biography of the Stevenson ancestry. Of these, only *Catriona* and *The Ebb-Tide* were completed.

It is evident from the *Vailima Letters* that, by this time, Stevenson was habitually overworking himself. To certain temperaments, working under certain conditions, there comes a time when they cannot stop; to rest is no longer in their power; and only death will bring cessation. Moreover, though Stevenson was earning an income which, for a man of letters, was large, his expenses, by his own account, continued to keep pace with his earnings. And, besides his proper work, this fiery thread-paper of a man was build-

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Weir of Hermiston and other Fragments*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *A Family of Engineers*.

ing, farming, colonising, working with his hands, — and dabbling in politics — a highly exhausting dissipation. And, one way and another, the *Vailima Letters* inevitably disengage the impression that the man was driven, that—whether by habit or by need, for what cause soever—Stevenson, in these last years, was toiling under the lash. His work cost him more than he had any right to give, more than, in his earlier years, he would ever have consented to give. Besides, as a man of letters, he had no superfluous strength wherewith to drive two or three other trades. That the estate of Vailima would come in time to yield a sufficient maintenance, thus releasing him from the immediate necessity for toil, was his constant hope. Meanwhile—

I must own [he writes in December 1893] that I have overworked bitterly—overworked—there, that's legible. My hand is a thing that was, and in the meanwhile so are my brains. And here, in the very midst, comes a plausible scheme to make Vailima pay, which will perhaps let me into considerable expense just when I don't want it.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous January (1893) Stevenson's health had again suffered severely from an attack of influenza, from which, in all probability, it

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Vailima Letters*.



never fully recovered. Prostrated by sickness, he began to dictate *St Ives* from his bed; and when his voice failed, he continued to dictate upon his fingers. Taking into consideration the circumstances in which it was composed, *St Ives* is a piece of heroism. It might be supposed that a novelist and man of letters of established repute would, at forty-three, begin to take a little ease. Stevenson never did. Whatever the reason in the background, he conceived it his duty to spur his ailing flesh to the last ounce; and, to his honour be it said, he fulfilled that conception to the letter. In the winter of 1894 he turned from *St Ives* to continue *Weir of Hermiston*; and the last sentence of that fragment contains the last words he ever wrote. "On the afternoon of 4 Dec. 1894, he was talking gaily with his wife, when the sudden rupture of a blood-vessel in the brain laid him at her feet, and within two hours all was over."<sup>1</sup>

— So Robert Louis Stevenson, whose first published essay was rejected by the *Saturday Review*, came into his own peculiar kingdom at last; and died; and was buried upon the summit of Mount Vaea, in the island of his last exile.

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*: art., "Stevenson, Robert Louis."

## IV.

## THE MORALIST.

. . . Life, my old shipmate, life, at any moment and in any view, is as dangerous as a sinking ship; and yet it is man's handsome fashion to carry umbrellas, to wear indiarubber overshoes, to begin vast works, and to conduct himself in every way as if he might hope to be eternal. And for my own poor part I should despise the man who, even on board a sinking ship, should omit to take a pill or to wind up his watch. That, my friend, would not be the human attitude.—R. L. S., *Fables*.

Doctor Desprez always rose early. Before the smoke arose, before the first cart rattled over the bridge to the day's labour in the fields, he was to be found wandering in his garden. Now he would pick a bunch of grapes; now he would eat a big pear under the trellis; now he would draw all sorts of fancies on the path with the end of his cane; now he would go down and watch the river running endlessly past the timber landing-place at which he moored his boat. There was no time, he used to say, for making theories like the early morning.—R. L. S., *The Treasure of Franchard*.

THERE is no time, indeed, for making theories like the early morning. In his early youth Stevenson acquired that seductive habit, which remained a passion with him to the end. And the method of his philosophy was ever the same. "When I was a boy," said his Will o' the Mill,

"I was a bit puzzled, and hardly knew whether it was myself or the world that was curious and worth looking into. Now, I know it is myself, and stick to that." Stevenson wrote *Will o' the Mill* when he was seven- or eight-and-twenty, when his Edinburgh days of college, of engineering, of law, of "jink," and the rest, were done; when the term of his nameless, self-ordained apprenticeship had expired; and after the publication of the *Virginibus Puerisque* essays and the two small books of travel. To me, at least, that melancholy and beautiful fable is the best of Stevenson, and resumes his whole ideal philosophy of life. It is highly abstract and visionary, to be sure; but there are a wonderful feeling for beauty, an extraordinary imaginative perception, and the whole is informed with a sort of fatalism, hopeless yet courageous, which the English mind sets to the account of the Celtic temperament.

*The Treasure of Franchard*, written some five years later, when the author was living in the south of France (where, as he says in later life, he was really "happy"—for once), embraces a more smiling picture of the ideal Stevenson in Dr Desprez, that unstable and meticulous philosopher. Hark to the professor of the Art of Life. "We hardly know anything, my man,

until we try to learn. *Interrogate your consciousness,*" cries the sage. Deeply in love with the "appearances of life," profoundly interested in their effect upon himself, Stevenson was for ever exploring his consciousness; and, with a sort of naïve egoism, he has made the whole reading world partaker in the fruits of that fantastic country.

First and foremost and always, be it remembered, Stevenson was an artist, a maker. He was entirely employed in making works of art. Out of the stuff of life to fashion something, to produce an effect—this was his one absorbing occupation. All else might be well or ill—it was by the way, and of little moment; and although there were exceptions, times when the generosity of the man compelled his partner, the exclusive artist, to descend into the arena, as in the leading instances of the Stevensonian intervention on behalf of the luckless Samoans, harried and bought and sold by German officials, and the small-sword parade in the matter of Father Damien and the "Reverend Dr Hyde of Honolulu," yet, even then, we find the champion lamenting that the conditions of combat prevented him from producing (what he called) literature. "I do not go in for literature; address myself to sensible people rather than to

sensitive," he says; and, "there is not even a good sentence in it" (*A Footnote to History*), "but perhaps—I don't know—it may be found an honest, clear volume."<sup>1</sup> One may note in passing that he is here quite inconsistent with his own express definitions of the scope of literature, to be found elsewhere in his works; but Stevenson was far too clever an artist to be fettered by his own theories. And, indeed, I think that the man of letters does not live, who might not feel a just satisfaction in the authorship of that volume deprecated by its author, *A Footnote to History*.

And so, among Stevenson's first essays, written when he was a lad of twenty, loafing in Edinburgh, you find a little piece called *The Wreath of Immortelles*, which is the performance of a hypersensitive youth who loves to dally with words, words, words. The boy is only learning to use his various equipment; he is endowed with sentiment, insight, imagination, wit, humour, and a love for style as a thing of intrinsic value; but, he has laborious years to expend before he can exercise these gifts in harmonious combination. And so, some twelve or fourteen years later, you find the mature artist—who was far too intelligent a person not to appreciate the situation—

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Vailima Letters*.

you find the cunning workman preaching another sermon upon the same text, using his old, unhappy experience, and dexterously superadding a moral upon the purgative influence of the hand of time.

The comparison of the two essays is instructive:—

. . . There is a certain frame of mind to which a cemetery is, if not an antidote, at least an alleviation. If you are in a fit of the blues, go nowhere else. It was in obedience to this wise regulation that the other morning found me lighting my pipe at the entrance to Old Greyfriars', thoroughly sick of the town, the country, and myself . . . Just then I saw two women coming down a path, one of them old, and the other younger, with a child in her arms. Both had faces eaten with famine and hardened with sin, and both had reached that stage of degradation, much lower in a woman than a man, when all care for dress is lost. As they came down they neared a grave, where some pious friend or relative had laid a wreath of immortelles, and put a bell glass over it, as is the custom . . . I was struck a great way off with something religious in the attitude of these two unkempt and haggard women; and I drew near faster, but still cautiously, to hear what they were saying. Surely on them the spirit of death and decay had descended: I had no education to dread here: should I not have a chance of seeing nature? Alas! a pawnbroker could not have been more practical and com-

monplace, for this was what the kneeling woman said to the woman upright—this and nothing more: “Eh, what extravagance!” O nineteenth century, wonderful art thou indeed—wonderful, but wearisome in thy stale and deadly uniformity!<sup>1</sup> &c., &c.

Thus the youth, taking himself, apparently, with the most complete gravity. Now, listen to the man:—

There, in the hot fits of youth, I came to be unhappy . . . But . . . even while I still continued to be a haunter of the graveyard, I began insensibly to turn my attention to the grave-diggers, and was weaned out of myself to observe the conduct of visitors. This was dayspring, indeed, to a lad in such great darkness. Not that I began to see men, or to try to see them, from within, nor to learn charity and modesty and justice from the sight; but still stared at them externally from the prison windows of my affectation. Once I remember to have observed two working women with a baby halting by a grave; there was something monumental in the grouping, one upright carrying the child, the other with bowed face crouching by her side. A wreath of immortelles under a glass dome had thus attracted them; and, drawing near, I overheard their judgment on that wonder: “Eh, what extravagance!” To a youth afflicted with the callosity of sentiment, this quaint and pregnant saying appeared merely base . . .

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*.

I would fain strike a note that should be more heroical ; but the ground of all youth's suffering, solitude, hysteria, and haunting of the graves, is nothing else than naked, ignorant selfishness. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The question inevitably arises, What percentage of Caledonian students had Stevenson observed to frequent the nearest municipal cemetery? To hear this moralist, one would imagine a habit of graveyard soliloquy to be as common to youth as surreptitious smoking. And then, with one of those singular contradictions that surprise us at every turn in the works of Stevenson, we find this morbid dissertation to be but the prologue to a noble and manly passage, the funeral oration upon the author's departed friend. Here, as we read, we perceive another example of that gospel of courage which he was ever preaching.

For, what are the *Virginibus Puerisque* essays but so many gay calls to the slumbering courage eternal in the heart of man? The earlier chapters were written when the author was five-and-twenty; the latter pieces, some three years later, at the same time as *Will o' the Mill*; and I like to set the whole series beside that incomparable fable, and to take them together as the best of Stevenson. They are so kindly, humorous, and

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.



fantastically jovial, it is odds but you shall rise from their perusal in quite a little glow of pleasure, and pleasure of a sparkling, crystal quality for which you may search the residue of Stevensonian works—always excepting the Dedications, and, perhaps, parts of the *Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*—in vain. You shall receive other sensations in plenty; of pity, and terror, and admiration, and delight; but never, I think, a sensation quite so purely pleasing.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that the irresponsible essayist treats of the passion of love as one who has never apprehended the significance of that formidable expression; "It is not at all within the province of a prose-essayist to give a picture of this hyperbolic state of mind," he says, and perhaps he is right. Nevertheless, we will gladly go with him where he goes, music accompanying our steps, though the grassy road delicately skirts precipices, and airily bridges some ugly abysms. Or, as Stevenson puts it in his own charming manner, the reader's

way takes him along a by-road, not much frequented, but very even and pleasant, which is called

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<sup>1</sup> The temper and style and air of *Virginibus Puerisque* won the author from a friend the nickname of "Mr Fastidious Brisk," an apt piece of essential criticism in which (I am told) he rejoiced.

Commonplace Lane, and leads to the Belvedere of Commonsense. Thence he shall command an agreeable, if no very noble prospect; and while others behold the East and West, the Devil and the Sunrise, he will be contentedly aware of a sort of morning hour upon all sublunary things, with an army of shadows running speedily and in many different directions into the great daylight of Eternity. The shadows and the generations, the shrill doctors and the plangent wars, go by into ultimate silence and emptiness; but underneath all this, a man may see, out of the Belvedere windows, much green and peaceful landscape; many firelit parlours; good people laughing, drinking, and making love as they did before the Flood or the French Revolution; and the old shepherd telling his tale under the hawthorn.<sup>1</sup>

We have come a long way from the boy and his sick musings in the sordid graveyard, you see; for "all clouds roll away at last, and the troubles of youth in particular are things but of a moment."<sup>2</sup> This young gentleman, entering already upon one province of his many-citied kingdom, is discoursing of its polity to the grown men and women who live there; and though he pointedly deride them, this chief among special pleaders sets them all smiling; and some of

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Virginibus Puerisque*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

them fall in love with him. For, as I have said, the words of Stevenson are informed with a fine resolve to make the best of things;—a spirit the more admirable when we call to mind (as I think we should) how the author was constantly liable to dangerous sickness, so that in his very boyhood we find him, as he tells us, “toiling (as I thought) under the very dart of death;”<sup>1</sup> and how he was acquainted, even at twenty-five, with the deadly ills of total nerve-prostration. In the *Virginibus* series, *Ordered South* is significantly set between the jovial *Apology for Idlers* and the brave *Æs Triplex*; and in *Ordered South* we have the artist, constant in extremity to the ruling passion, making a serene, picturesque, even comfortable, little work of art out of the very sensations that deprive him of sensation.

The world is disenchanted for him. He seems to himself to touch things with muffled hands, and to see them through a veil. His life becomes a palsied fumbling after notes that are silent when he has found and struck them. He cannot recognise that this phlegmatic and unimpressionable body with which he now goes burthened is the same that he knew heretofore so quick and delicate and alive.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Virginibus Puerisque*.

How many there must be in this generation who will recognise an eloquently just description of their own plight, at one time or another in their lives? And the essayist, who is an epicurean and also a moralist, goes on to draw his moral. After all, "the 'spirit of delight' comes often on small wings";<sup>1</sup> and the sick man finds consolation in the face of death, in the thought that the life he loved will continue still, in joy and sorrow, when he is gone. It is true that the author, who, fortunately, did not die after all, added a note after some years (in a manner quite Ruskinian) to the effect that "a man who fancies himself a-dying will get cold comfort from the very youthful view expressed in this essay."<sup>2</sup> Never mind; the youth did his best with his view; and we like him the better for his performance; although I am not sure, if you "go to that"—I am not, I say, quite certain—that silence were not still the better part.

Had Stevenson been untimely overtaken by death when he had written *Virginibus Puerisque* and *Will o' the Mill*; and of all his works, had only these two gone down to posterity; he would still have earned the reputation of a refined and admirable artist. The dual nature of man, one

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Virginibus Puerisque*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of those root-ideas which we find germinating in the minds of most great writers,<sup>1</sup> and bringing forth all sorts of strange fruit, continually possessed the mind and inspired the imagination of Stevenson. "The clergyman, in his spare hours, may be winning battles, the farmer sailing ships, the banker reaping triumph in the arts: all leading another life, plying another trade from that they chose,"<sup>2</sup> he says. The two lives are so inextricably interwoven that to discourse upon the one without touching the other is nearly impossible; but I think that the little *Virginibus* cycle may be loosely described as Stevenson's idea of the conduct of that life which all must live, whether they will or no; and that *Will o' the Mill* is the Stevensonian "pattern in the heavens"; the story of a sojourn in the country of the ideal. But, as I say, the two ideas are necessarily so intermingled, lie so largely beyond the province of language, and appear in each other's places with aspects so protean, that separate definition is impossible. I make but an approximate suggestion; let us take the argument at that.

<sup>1</sup> As, for example, the idea of the man whose life is secretly spied upon by one who is unknown to him, or whom he believes to be dead, which haunted the mind of Dickens. Compare, notably, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *Edwin Drood*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

I would not care to risk marring the perfect presentment of *Will o' the Mill* by any clumsy analysis, or even by quotation. Have you read *Will o' the Mill*? (if you have not, then—if you own a taste for such fare—there is a fine little repast laid for you). Then you will remember how that Will was the very type of the perfect egoist; how, despite all his passionate aspirations, he never went down into the plain, but stayed in the mountains, beneath the pine-woods, beside the clear running water, like a miser hoarding his aspirations and magnificent illusions, and savouring the while his simple joys of life like an epicure; how aspiration changes to ambition, and still he stays; how the fat young man (whom I take to have been Mephisto upon a holiday) came and scattered those illusions in a breath, so that Will never afterwards dared put his fortune to the test; how he lost the chief good of life, and never knew it until too late; how, nevertheless, he continued to possess the good which he had chosen, and for which he had paid the price; and how, at last, Death came to him as a friend.

There is no moral to this fable, but the Celtic moral of fatalism: a fatalism which Stevenson sometimes tacitly disavows, and sometimes poignantly presents to you. And, when all is said,

we are as much concerned with the thrilling, vivid, picturesque presentment of the theme as with the theme itself. Style and treatment exactly accord with the subject; and the scenes, succeeding each other in a natural progression, remain like pictures in the memory. The mill beside the river in the mountain-pass; the clear running water, the waving pine-trees; the passage of the soldiers; the vision of the valley in the setting sun; the coming of the fat young man; the figure of the parson's Marjory; above all, the night when Will o' the Mill goes at last upon his travels, which I venture to characterise as one of the finest pieces of pictorial narration in English literature; and, again, the clear running water, the waving of the grave pine-woods, and, enfolding all like an atmosphere, the pure serenity of the mountains:—who that has once read of them does not count these things among the treasures of his fairy city of remembrance?

Disengaging the impression received from the beautiful accompanying images, we conceive of the central figure as of a strong man, statically strong like a tree, curiously studying himself, and profoundly entertained by the workings of that quick and intricate organisation; clinging, with invincible tenacity, to all that ministers

to the pleasure of that divine constitution. He loves the dawn and sunrise, the communings of running water, the silent companionship of trees; the taste of these delights, he knows, leaves no regret. Let these, then, suffice.

And in the amiable Dr Desprez, in *The Treasure of Franchard*, we find the same qualities. *The Treasure of Franchard* is a story only tintured with allegory; but in that tincture, as I have said, I think we may discern a parallel philosophy of the ideal, as it appealed to Stevenson:—

The Doctor was a connoisseur of sunrises, and loved a good theatrical effect to usher in the day . . . The morning after he had been summoned to the dying mountebank, the Doctor visited the wharf at the tail of his garden, and had a long look at the running water. This he called prayer . . . After he had watched a mile or so of the clear water running by before his eyes, seen a fish or two come to the surface with a gleam of silver, and sufficiently admired the long shadows of the trees falling half across the river from the opposite bank, with patches of moving sunlight in between, he strolled once more up the garden and through his house into the street feeling cool and renovated. . . . "Let me compose myself," he says, after an agitating interview . . . And so he dismissed his preoccupations by an effort of the will which he



had long practised, and let his soul roam abroad in the contemplation of the morning. He inhaled the air, tasting it critically as a connoisseur tastes a vintage, and prolonging the expiration with hygienic gusto. He counted the little flecks of cloud along the sky. He followed the movements of the birds round the church tower—making long sweeps, hanging poised, or turning airy somersaults in fancy, and beating the wind with imaginary pinions. And in this way he regained peace of mind and animal composure, conscious of his limbs, conscious of the sight of his eyes, conscious that the air had a cool taste, like a fruit, at the top of his throat. . . .

The picture is graceful, playful, sympathetic, and—a little—inhuman. I cannot but think that the author had himself insistently present to himself when he penned that portrait. There is never any ambiguity about the work of Stevenson; his pictures are so vivid, that when he paints from a mirror, we cannot but read the artist's own lineaments upon the canvas. And so, in the ideal philosopher, I seem to discover that singular lack—the want of some kindly, indefinable, human quality, which is apt to haunt the reader through his perusal of the works of Stevenson.

The same suspicion of a certain something wanting is disengaged even from the jolly pages of the two little books of voyages and travels,

*An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. To say of a man that he is imperfect, may seem a trite observation; but, when such an one sets up to be a smiling philosopher of catholic sympathies, he undertakes an enterprise which (according to evidence extant) does actually fall within the circle of human competence; and to detect an occasional blank in his purview is surely not unfair (though highly ungrateful) criticism. Moreover, in these journeyings the traveller went along with a ghostly companion, who once dwelt among men as the Reverend Laurence Sterne. That companion sharpens his pupil's vision in the daytime, and sits at his elbow the while he writes up his journal at night. Had the Reverend Laurence neglected to record the *Sentimental Journey*, it is odds that Stevenson would neither have gone a-cruising in the Arethusa, nor a-roving with Mademoiselle Modestine, goading her delicately with a pin. For these charming records and witty moralisations are the *Sentimental Journey*, minus the soft Irish spirit of Sterne, plus the dour Scots temperament and a perception of the romance of landscape. This is no dispraise; for none of us exist save by virtue of ancestry. Only, when Robert Louis Stevenson went about with the Reverend Laurence Sterne,

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the clergyman used, I think, to induce something of a pose. Turn to the *Epilogue* to the *Inland Voyage*, written some ten years after the adventure, when Stevenson had rather discarded the Reverend Laurence, and you shall perceive, in that entertaining farce, a slight but characteristic difference from the earlier narrative.

The next year after writing these gay philosophies of travel, and *Will o' the Mill*, we find the author drafting an austere treatise on Morals—*Lay Morals*,<sup>1</sup> if you please, in which one may recognise the groundwork of *Pulvis et Umbra* and *A Christmas Sermon*,<sup>2</sup> which were published eight or nine years later. Of the *Lay Morals*, it may be enough to say that the preacher enunciates, with a fine pomp and eloquence of language, the sort of conclusions which sensible persons at all times and in all places have come to of themselves, and which they are usually content to hold in unaggressive silence. But, to a Scot nurtured in a babel of theological controversy, something sickened, probably, with its tedious, inhuman clamour, and inheriting, moreover, the talent for metaphysic common to his race, some expression of aggravated opinion may well have become a natural necessity.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

*Pulvis et Umbra* has been admirably described as a "cosmic utterance"; and so, in so far as it treats of the Kosmos by name, it may be. The picture is only true, so far as we understand the truth, in a sense highly partial; the moral is picturesque, even noble. But from such a Kosmos may heaven preserve all good folk! Here is the keynote to this astounding symphony:—

. . . But take the Kosmos with a grosser faith, as our senses give it us. We behold space sown with rotatory islands, suns and worlds and the shards and wrecks of systems: some, like the sun, still blazing; some rotting, like the earth; others, like the moon, stable in desolation. All of these we take to be made of something we call matter: a thing which no analysis can help us to conceive; to whose incredible properties no familiarity can reconcile our minds. This stuff, when not purified by the lustration of fire, rots uncleanly into something we call life; seized through all its atoms with a pediculous malady; swelling in tumours that become independent, sometimes even (by an abhorrent prodigy) locomotory; one splitting into millions, millions cohering into one, as the malady proceeds through varying stages. This vital putrescence of the dust, used as we are to it, yet strikes us with occasional disgust, and the profusion of worms in a piece of ancient turf, or the air of a marsh darkened with insects, will sometimes check our breathing,

so that we aspire for cleaner places. But none is clean : the moving sand is infected with lice ; the pure spring, where it bursts out of the mountain, is a mere issue of worms ; even in the hard rock the crystal is forming . . .

What a monstrous spectre is this man, the disease of the agglutinated dust, lifting alternate feet or lying drugged with slumber ; killing, feeding, growing, bringing forth small copies of himself ; grown upon with hair like glass, fitted with eyes that move and glitter in his face ; a thing to set children screaming ;—and yet looked at nearer, known as his fellows know him, how surprising are his attributes !<sup>1</sup>

Well—after all—things are not really like that. Here is a vision, monstrous, vivid, intolerable, as though beheld in the refracted vision of fever. Jeremy Taylor might have written with an equal vigour and coloured magnificence of manner ; but Jeremy Taylor would have discoursed in another vein, because he was inspired with, what he would have designated, faith in God. Shakespeare might have written these passages better ; but, when Shakespeare was in this sort of mood, he preferred to write *Hamlet*. It may be, that the great and nameless fear which descends upon man when some unknown prop or stay is suddenly withdrawn from his spirit, the panic

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

terror which would now and again cast the vain and valiant George Borrow to the ground, and hold him with his face in the dust, has here assailed the bulwarks of Stevenson's private city of Zion. I do not know—perhaps the parallel is merely fanciful. In any case, *Pulvis et Umbra*, this “cosmic utterance,” is the utterance of a sick man in a strong access of personal emotion, curious of style, and invincibly moral, or rather Calvinistic, to the last extremity. Childe Roland to the dark tower comes. And in his strenuous moralisation of what is a passing mood, it is the opulent style of the presentment that is really admirable, and the moral that appeals to us is the implicit, unconscious moral of the author's courage in the face of these terrific phantasms: the same conscious yet unshaken courage which shines throughout his work.

*A Christmas Sermon*, written when the author was about forty years old, is conceived in a different vein. Nimbly discoursing from his favourite rostrum, the pulpit, he eloquently formulates a series of witty and sensible criticisms upon the common way of life. It is “all merry nice”; but, as I have said, the minority of people are content to hold these sentiments without indulging in didactic zeal, a zeal in-

herent in the Stevensonian constitution. And, in this case, the preacher had already said his say when he was still a youthful Ecclesiastes, discoursing in the essays *Virginibus Puerisque*. At the first, he steps aside from the moving crowd, and winds a melodious defiance upon his horn—a gallant defiance to pain, and failure, and death:—

Whether we regard life as a lane leading to a dead wall—a mere bag's end, as the French say—or whether we think of it as a vestibule or gymnasium, where we wait our turn and prepare our faculties for some noble destiny; whether we thunder in a pulpit, or pule in little atheistic poetry-books, about its vanity and brevity; whether we look justly for years of health and vigour, or are about to mount into a bath-chair, as a step towards the hearse; in each and all of these views and situations there is but one conclusion possible: that a man should stop his ears against paralysing terror, and run the race that is set before him with a single mind.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Stevenson, at seven- or eight-and-twenty. Hear him also in middle age:—

To look back upon the past year, and see how little we have striven, and to what small purpose; and how often we have been cowardly and hung back, or temerarious and rushed unwisely in; and how every day

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Virginibus Puerisque*.

and all day long we have transgressed the law of kindness [here are the old accents of surplice and bands, but there is no reason to suppose the preacher is not perfectly serious]:—it may seem a paradox, but in the bitterness of these discoveries a certain consolation resides. Life is not designed to minister to a man's vanity . . . When the time comes that he should go, there need be few illusions left about himself. *Here lies one who meant well, tried a little, failed much*:—surely that may be his epitaph, of which he need not be ashamed. Nor will he complain at the summons which calls a defeated soldier from the field: defeated, ay, if he were Paul or Marcus Aurelius!—but if there is still one inch of fight in his old spirit, undishonoured. The faith which sustained him in his lifelong blindness and lifelong disappointment will scarce even be required in this last formality of laying down his arms. Give him a march with his old bones; there, out of the glorious sun-coloured earth, out of the day and the dust and the ecstasy—there goes another Faithful Failure!<sup>1</sup>

It is well meant, it is bravely said; and yet, is the conclusion entirely sound? I hardly think that either the great Apostle or the august Emperor would be honestly gratified by the inscription upon their place of sepulture of the epitaph made by Mr Stevenson, Anno Domini 1890 or so. These men are among the mighty

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.



builders of the world; their portion was not failure, but transcendent success; not defeat, but victory. But a half-truth balanced by its opposite moiety is robbed of half its glory; and what becomes of the work of art under these circumstances? And the artist is bound to work within conditions imposed upon him from without. Moreover, Stevenson was far too acute a logician not to look, when it suited his purpose, upon both sides of the shield; and in his *Fables* he gives both obverse and reverse. The *Fables* were written at intervals during the latter half of his career; and perhaps, of all the forms of literary art employed by Stevenson—and he used most of those extant at one time or another—that of the fable “set his genius” best. Here romance and metaphysic, character and wit, may meet together in harmony in the realm that is both homely and ideal; and the problem of presentment offers valuable opportunities in the matter of prose composition.

In *The Yellow Paint*, *The House of Eld*, and *Faith, Half-Faith, and No Faith at all*, is figured that naïve rebellion against stolid convention which characterises an age of transition. Generation succeeds generation, the son follows in the sire’s footsteps, until a line of cleavage starts into view, and a gulf widens; and across

it young five-and-twenty, with scornful incomprehension, beholds his father as though that respectable elder belonged to another planet. It is, in fact, the case of the new wine and the old bottles; the parable whose musical phrases linger in the mind of childhood;—the careless mind, which, at the same time, tacitly declines to remark any meaning in them.

Voltaire (between whom and Stevenson an interesting parallel remains to be drawn by the curious) thought it eminently worth while to satirise the priestcraft of his day; and in *The Yellow Paint* Stevenson found consolation in directing a quaint and witty satire against a certain subtle doctrine of—what is known as—evangelicalism. Among the warring clans of sect and Church, this peaceful word is a slogan, or battle-cry, carrying such dire associations, and charged with meanings so esoteric, that I employ the expression with a becoming hesitation. I make no comment upon the merits of the quarrel in which Stevenson took sides so gaily. Although he loved preaching, he had small sympathy with the consecrated professors of that art. *The Yellow Paint* gives one aspect of the situation, *The House of Eld*—an admirable and picturesque fable—gives the contrary view. The morals of both are quite inconclusive; but

here Stevenson is harping on his old theme—the unsatisfying nature of life. So in *Faith, Half-Faith, and No Faith at all*, where, in a wilderness of discords, there strikes the one chivalric note.

In the ancient days there went three men upon pilgrimage: one was a priest, and one was a virtuous person, and the third was an old rover with his axe.

The two first dispute upon the grounds of faith; and as they go along, the adventures that befall them upset the priestly theories, to the satisfaction of the virtuous person. Meanwhile, the old rover with the axe holds his peace; until—

at last one came running, and told them all was lost: that the powers of darkness had besieged the Heavenly Mansions, that Odin was to die, and evil triumph.

“I have been grossly deceived,” cried the virtuous person.

“All is lost now,” said the priest.

“I wonder if it is too late to make it up with the devil?” said the virtuous person.

“O, I hope not,” said the priest. “And at any rate we can but try.—But what are you doing with your axe?” says he to the rover.

“I am off to die with Odin,” said the rover.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Fables*.

And in *Something in It*, the best of the fables, Stevenson, who "was one like Glaucus that could change his shape, yet he could be always told," does the last justice to the evangelist.

The missionary was naturally incredulous of the tales the natives told him of their religion. "'There is nothing in it,' said the missionary." But one day he was wrapt into the heathen place of the hereafter—the wrong heaven—and his views were suddenly enlarged. The story is perfectly told. And—

The next moment the missionary came up in the midst of the sea, and there before him were the palm-trees of the island. He swam to the shore gladly, and landed. Much matter of thought was in that missionary's mind.

"I seem to have been misinformed upon some points," said he. "Perhaps there is not much in it, as I supposed; but there is something in it after all. Let me be glad of that."

And he rang the bell for service.<sup>1</sup>

Again, in a word, courage is the moral, though it be not always precisely the moral that Stevenson intended. So it is in *Markheim*, that singular and vivid study. "A high and

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Fables*.

simple courage shines through all his writings,"<sup>1</sup> says Mr Raleigh. Courage, though

The sticks break, the stones crumble,  
The eternal altars tilt and tumble,<sup>2</sup>

—*Courage quand même*. Here is the last word of Stevenson's philosophy: as, indeed, it has been that of how many millions of men and women besides, renowned or ingloriously obscure, who have lived and passed in silence. But Stevenson must find utterance, or he could not live. He was vocally inclined. Therein lies the difference.

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Raleigh, *Robert Louis Stevenson*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Fables*.

## V.

## THE ARTIST.

If to feel, in the ink of the slough,  
 And the sink of the mire,  
 Veins of glory and fire  
 Run through and transpire and transpire,  
 And a secret purpose of glory in every part,  
 And the answering glory of battle fill my heart ;  
 To thrill with the joy of girded men  
 To go on for ever and fail and go on again,  
 And be mauled to the earth and arise,  
 And contend for the shade of a word and a  
     thing not seen with the eyes :  
 With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at  
     night  
 That somehow the right is the right  
 And the smooth shall bloom from the rough :  
 Lord, if that were enough ?

—R. L. S., *Songs of Travel*.

WHEN Stevenson flings his dainty glove in the  
 iron face of destiny, mouths it in his private  
 pulpit, or beguiles us by the wayside, we applaud  
 and admire, and are entertained ; but when the  
 artist discourses of his art, we are moved to lend  
 a serious attention. “ I never cared a cent for

anything but art, and never shall,"<sup>1</sup> says Loudon Dodd; and no more, I think, did his maker. A man's theories are, ultimately, of value exactly in proportion as the man himself is an example of their efficacy. "In art you must give your skin;" and Stevenson never grudged that sacrifice. Of his strictly technical disquisitions I shall have something to say in another place; it is the Stevensonian code of ethics relating to the art of letters that I have here to consider.

When he was thirty years old, and when he had already written essays, verses, treatises on morals, criticisms, voyages and travels, and stories, Stevenson promulgated his *Morality of the Profession of Letters*.<sup>2</sup> Seven or eight years later, he wrote the *Letter to a Young Gentleman who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art*. In that interval, as will be seen, the author's principles seem in some degree to have suffered a change. We can but suppose that when the artist indited the *Letter to a Young Gentleman*, he wrote under the influence of a passing mood, which led him, in one passage, to a highly inconsistent piece of generalisation.

The *Morality of the Profession of Letters* is an excellent morality: going squarely into the ques-

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Wrecker*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

tion, setting a high and reasonable ideal, fit both to inspire and chasten the aspirant. The preacher begins by unsparing denunciation of those who "adopt this way of life" (the craft of writing) "with an eye set singly on the liveliness." This attitude of mind, he says, must infallibly produce "a slovenly, base, untrue, and empty literature"; he proceeds eloquently to enforce the argument; and he goes on to specify the motives which alone should influence a young man to make his choice of a trade:—

There are two just reasons for the choice of any way of life: the first is inbred taste in the chooser; the second some high utility in the industry selected. Literature, like any other art, is singularly interesting to the artist; and, in a degree peculiar to itself among the arts, it is useful to mankind . . . So kindly is the world arranged, such great profit may arise from a small degree of human reliance on oneself, and such, in particular, is the happy star of this trade of writing, that it should combine pleasure and profit to both parties and be at once agreeable, like fiddling, and useful, like good preaching. This is to speak of literature at its highest; and with the four great elders who are still spared to our respect and admiration, with Carlyle, Ruskin, Browning, and Tennyson before us, it would be cowardly to consider it at first in any lesser aspect. But while we cannot follow these athletes, while we may none of us, perhaps, be very vigorous, very ori-



ginal, or very wise, I still contend that, in the humblest sort of literary work, we have it in our power either to do great harm or great good . . . So that the first duty of any man who is to write is intellectual. Designedly or not, he has so far set himself up for a leader of the minds of men; and he must see that his own mind is kept supple, charitable, and bright. . . . To please is to serve; and so far from its being difficult to instruct while you amuse, it is difficult to do the one thoroughly without the other . . . And so, if I were minded to welcome any great accession to our trade, it should not be from any reason of a higher wage, but because it was a trade which was useful in a very great and a very high degree.

Here are sentiments which must find an applauding echo in all honest and generous minds.

In the second essay, written some years later, when the name of Robert Louis Stevenson had become famous, the essayist addresses an audience incomparably larger: here was an opportunity to strike another stroke which should go to the attainment of a certain recognised standard, or tradition, in letters; which tradition, as it is his heritage, so it is the business of every honest man of letters to uphold and to confirm. He begins by drawing an analysis of the unstable mind of youth. He deals with the aspirant who stands at that painful juncture in

life when he must make his choice of a trade, with a sympathy both just and acute. Then, in admirable terms, he lays down the stern conditions under which the artist must exercise his art. And then, the consenting mind, following the preceptor with eagerness, is suddenly brought to a stand. After formulating the questionable doctrine that the artist should "pay assiduous court to the bourgeois who carries the purse," our moralist goes on to carry the argument to its logical conclusion. These are points we need not discuss: the expression, whether of a passing mood, or of a piece of special pleading, needs no elaborate refutation. I prefer to remember that Stevenson the artist never quitted his task until the piece of work in hand was as near perfect as he could make it. Sick or well, travelling or sitting at home, though the inspiration tarried, though he must write and rewrite, and remodel from top to bottom, though he were deprived of speech and the power to hold his pen, and must dictate upon his fingers,<sup>1</sup> the indomitable maker still toiled to attain perfection, until there was left no stroke untried, and the voice of inspiration had found complete utterance.

From the *Vailima Letters* we may gain some

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Vailima Letters*.

notion of the way in which he went about his work.

Whatever the result, the mill has to be kept turning [he writes], . . . night or morning, I do my darndest, and if I cannot charge for merit, I must e'en charge for toil, of which I have plenty, and plenty more ahead before this cup is drained ; sweat and hyssop are the ingredients. [And some three months later.] Since I last laid down my pen, I have written and rewritten *The Beach of Falesá* : something like sixty thousand words of sterling domestic fiction (the story, you will understand, is only half that length) ; and now I don't want to write any more again for ever, or feel so ; and I've got to overhaul it once again to my sorrow. I was all yesterday revising, and found a lot of slacknesses. [And again.] I often work six and seven, and sometimes eight hours. [And when he has finished *The Ebb-Tide*.] But O [he writes], it has been such a grind ! The devil himself would allow a man to brag a little after such a crucifixion ! And indeed I'm only bragging for a change before I return to the darned thing lying waiting for me on p. 88, where I last broke down. I break down at every sentence, I may observe ; and lie here and sweat, till I can get one sentence wrung out after another.

A month later, and he has already made some way with *A Family of Engineers*.

Since I wrote this last, I have written a whole

chapter of my grandfather, and read it to-night ; it was on the whole much appreciated, and I kind of hope it ain't bad myself. 'Tis a third writing, but it wants a fourth. [And for a last extract.] I have been recasting the beginning of the *Hanging Judge*, or *Weir of Hermiston* ; then I have been cobbling on my grandfather, whose last chapter (there are only to be four) is in the form of pieces of paper, a huge welter of inconsequence, and that glimmer of faith (or hope) which one learns at this trade, that somehow and some time, by perpetual staring and glowering and rewriting, order will emerge.

The practice is sound, you see, though the theory goes a little awry ; and whose theory does not ? The son of the great engineers, the inheritor of an austere tradition, is ready to toil with a single eye to the point of honour until there is no more virtue in him.

For the artist [he writes in that same wonderful, inconsistent *Letter to a Young Gentleman*] works entirely upon honour. The public knows little or nothing of those merits in the quest of which you are condemned to spend the bulk of your endeavours. Merits of design, the merit of first-hand energy, the merit of a certain cheap accomplishment, which a man of the artistic temper easily acquires—these they can recognise, and these they value. But to those more exquisite refinements of proficiency and finish, which the artist so ardently desires and so keenly feels, for which

(in the vigorous words of Balzac) he must toil "like a miner buried in a landslip," for which, day after day, he recasts and revises and rejects—the gross mass of the public must be ever blind. To those lost pains, suppose you attain the highest pitch of merit, posterity may possibly do justice; suppose, as is so probable, you fail by even a hair's-breadth of the highest, rest certain they shall never be observed. Under the shadow of this cold thought, alone in his studio, the artist must preserve from day to day his constancy to the ideal.<sup>1</sup>

So Stevenson reads the Law; and we know he fulfilled it to the letter. And so, in his example of unflinching industry, there lies the true moral for the aspirant. Here is the true lesson to the young gentleman who proposes to embrace the career of art.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

## VI.

## THE ROMANTIC.

. . . Romance,  
 The Angel-Playmate, raining down  
 His golden influences  
 On all I saw, and all I dreamed and did,  
 Walked with me arm and arm,  
 Or left me, as one bediademed with straws  
 And bits of glass, to gladden at my heart  
 Who had the gift to seek and feel and find  
 His fiery-hearted presence everywhere.

—W. E. HENLEY,  
*Arabian Nights' Entertainments.*

STEVENSON was a born romantic. Romance, which is the common heritage of childhood, remained his possession to the end. With the most of us—

Youth now flees on feathered foot,  
 Faint and fainter sounds the flute,  
 Rarer songs of gods ; . . .<sup>1</sup>

and the years, stealing on with muffled footsteps and blinding fingers, still conspire to veil from us the country of desire. But Stevenson never

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Underwoods.*

crossed the marches of his own domain. To him, the inevitable change from youth to experience carried with it no forgetfulness. The years brought gifts, but took little away; the child never died, but lived on with the man; and Stevenson, at thirty-three or so, wrote the romance of childhood in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, begun while he was living in Bournemouth.

Charles Dickens gave us the romance of childhood in prose, when he wrote the history of David Copperfield; and the book came with something of the force of a revelation upon a world of grown people who had fallen into the habit of shaping patterns of children all in the likeness of their own image. Dickens released the eternal child from this bondage of deformity; and the enfranchised spirit lives, and sings, and plays with its fellows, in Stevenson's smiling verses. Read the *Child's Garden* to a child of a certain age, and ten to one he, or she, will lend a gratified attention. This, they are thinking, is the kind of talk they can understand.

The rain is raining all around,  
It falls on field and tree,  
It rains on the umbrellas here,  
And on the ships at sea.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

I know not what indefinable picture is conjured up in these simple words, of desolate country, shining street, and grey ships tossing on grey surges, but I know that such a vision lives in the mind of childhood, and that it is of stuff like this, of quaint, indefinite collocations and associations, that a great part of childhood's happiness or unhappiness consists. Here is another infantine piece:—

Of speckled eggs the birdie sings  
And nests among the trees ;  
The sailor sings of ropes and things  
In ships upon the seas.

The children sing in far Japan,  
The children sing in Spain ;  
The organ with the organ-man  
Is singing in the rain.<sup>1</sup>

The child Robert Louis was acquainted with sickness ; and who that has been kept abed by reason of illness, or perhaps misdemeanour, but remembers the land of counterpane ? It is not a bright province in the child-country ; the sojourn there is nearly always compulsory, and requires, so to speak, more intellectual effort to get rid of a dull, even an intolerable, reality. Bed in the cold daylight, when all the coloured

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Child's Garden of Verses*.



world is calling and calling—here is a thing to dash the stoutest courage!

And does it not seem hard to you,  
When all the sky is clear and blue,  
And I should like so much to play,  
To have to go to bed by day?

But he makes the best of it—

And sometimes for an hour or so  
I watched my leaden soldiers go,  
With different uniforms and drills,  
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills ;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets  
All up and down among the sheets ;  
Or brought my trees and houses out,  
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow-hill,  
And sees before him, dale and plain,  
The pleasant land of counterpane.<sup>1</sup>

And when he went to bed at night, torn—  
lamenting, reproved—from the jolly fireside, the  
light and warmth, and the strange and fascinat-  
ing conversation of elders, do we not remember  
how—

All round the house is the jet-black night ;  
It stares through the window-pane ;  
It crawls in the corners, hiding from the light,  
And it moves with the moving flame.

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

Now my little heart goes a-beating like a drum,  
 With the breath of the Bogie in my hair ;  
 And all round the candle the crooked shadows come,  
 And go marching along up the stair.

The shadow of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,  
 The shadow of the child that goes to bed—  
 All the wicked shadows coming, tramp, tramp, tramp,  
 With the black night overhead.

The treasures of that lost country of the  
 primal years were esoterically precious ; and  
 like the fairy gold, they are now all withered  
 leaves. Now, we can look upon a whole arsenal  
 of edge-tools without sensible emotion ; but  
 hark to the treble voice :—

But of all of my treasures the last is the king,  
 For there's very few children possess such a thing ;  
 And that is a chisel, both handle and blade,  
 Which a man who was really a carpenter made.

“A man who was really a carpenter”—there  
 is all Eden in that simple utterance. Here is  
 another treasure, which is buried with a singular,  
 characteristic impulse :—

When the grass was closely mown,  
 Walking on the lawn alone,  
 In the turf a hole I found,  
 And hid a soldier underground.

. . . . .

Under grass alone he lies,  
Looking up with leaden eyes,  
Scarlet coat and pointed gun,  
To the stars and to the sun.

When the grass is ripe like grain,  
When the scythe is stoned again,  
When the lawn is shaven clear,  
Then my hole shall reappear.

I shall find him, never fear,  
I shall find my grenadier ;  
But, for all that's gone and come,  
I shall find my soldier dumb.

He has lived, a little thing,  
In the grassy woods of spring ;  
Done, if he could tell me true,  
Just as I should like to do.

He has seen the starry hours  
And the springing of the flowers ;  
And the fairy things that pass  
In the forests of the grass.<sup>1</sup>

Dreams and terrors, exquisite joys and rending griefs, a darling hoard of treasures, passionate love and hate as passionate, and the whole world for a playhouse,—~~these~~ these are some of the elements which make the children's life. Of love and hate Stevenson relates but little ; of all else, he is eloquent ; and here, for a last

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

quotation, is a piece in the great green play-house:—

Dear uncle Jim, this garden-ground,  
That now you smoke your pipe around,  
Has seen immortal actions done,  
And valiant battles lost and won.

. . . . .

But yonder, see ! apart and high,  
Frozen Siberia lies ; where I,  
With Robert Bruce and William Tell,  
Was bound by an enchanter's spell.

There, then, a while in chains we lay,  
In wintry dungeons, far from day ;  
But ris'n at length, with might and main,  
Our iron fetters burst in twain.

. . . . .

A thousand miles we galloped fast,  
And down the witches' lane we passed,  
And rode amain, with brandished sword,  
Up to the middle, through the ford.

Last we drew rein—a weary three—  
Upon the lawn, in time for tea,  
And from our steeds alighted down  
Before the gates of Babylon.<sup>1</sup>

The verses are very pleasant,—although, as verses, they have no great merit. Indeed, the same remark applies more or less to all the verse of Stevenson: a good subject, a delight.

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

ful manner, but lacking, save in rare flashes here and there, the last indefinable touch which is poetry. Plangent and picturesque as the verse of Stevenson is, he seldom, I think, lights upon the "only words in the only order"; and his finest and most romantic strains seem to bear the hammer-mark of the wielder of strong prose harmonies, rather than the serene touch of the born singer to the lute.<sup>1</sup> Take, for instance, the magnificent stanza from *Mater Triumphans*; which—to the ear of the present writer, at least—out of all the songs of Stevenson, rings strongest:—

Infant bridegroom, uncrowned king, unanointed priest,  
 Soldier, lover, explorer, I see you nuzzle the breast.  
 You that grope in my bosom shall load the ladies with  
 rings,  
 You, that came forth through the doors, shall burst the  
 doors of kings.

It is gorgeous, but it is scarcely poetry—a distinction that need be no dispraise. And how fine are the opening verses of the first stanza:—

Son of my woman's body, you go, to the drum and fife,  
 To taste the colour of love and the other side of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "A kind of prose Herrick divested of the gift of verse, and you behold the Bard." Thus Stevenson, talking, in a letter to a friend, of himself.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Songs of Travel*.

but of  
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 it a  
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The lines are surcharged with that indefinable quality we call romance, which makes the better half of life. Romance is indefinable; it must be apprehended by the light of nature shining upon illustration, or not at all. Stevenson has come as near to definition as may be.

The effect of night [he says], of any flowing water, of lighted cities, of the peep of day, of ships, of the open ocean, calls up in the mind an army of anonymous desires and pleasures . . . To come at all at the nature of this quality of romance, we must bear in mind the peculiarity of our attitude to any art. No art produces illusion; in the theatre we never forget that we are in the théâtre; and while we read a story, we sit wavering between two minds, now merely clapping our hands at the merit of the performance, now condescending to take an active part in fancy with the characters. This last is the triumph of romantic storytelling: when the reader consciously plays at being the hero, the scene is a good scene.

It may be noted in passing how people who are apt to grumble at the featureless character of Scott's heroes or heroines, forget that the lack of personality in the chief persons of the story is a prime cause of the readers' enjoyment, since it enables them to "push the hero aside," and "consciously play at being the hero," plunging into the tale in their own persons. Stevenson

himself could never suffer the colourless hero; his Jim Hawkins comes the nearest to the convention; and our young friend Jim, though he was scarcely the hero of the tale, being much eclipsed by Silver the Magnificent, was still the ingenious narrator of the best story (*quâ* story) Stevenson ever accomplished. As for his David Balfour, that dour, pragmatical, stubborn young man, he compels us, with my Lord Advocate Prestongrange, to "a respect mingled with awe." But this is by the way; let me not anticipate—"I take that expression," says the immortal Doctor Marigold, "out of a lot of romances I bought. . . . I never opened a single one of 'em—and I have opened many—but I found the romancer saying, 'Let me not anticipate': which being so, I wonder why he did anticipate, or who asked him to it")—let us return, I say, to the consideration of Stevenson expounding his theory of Romance:—

The threads of a story [he goes on] come from time to time together and make a picture in the web; the characters fall from time to time into some attitude to each other or to nature, which stamps the story home like an illustration. Crusoe recoiling from the footprint, Achilles shouting over against the Trojans, Ulysses bending the great bow, Christian running with his fingers in his ears,—these are each

culminating moments in the legend, and each has been printed on the mind's eye for ever . . . This, then, is the plastic part of literature: to embody character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a clear indication of part of the matter, in a form which made a particular appeal to him; for the embodiment of "character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye," is the sovereign merit of Stevenson; or, as he elsewhere expresses it, "Vital—that's what I am at, first: wholly vital, with a buoyancy of life. Then lyrical, if it may be, and picturesque, always with an epic value of scenes, so that the figures remain in the mind's eye for ever."<sup>2</sup>

For a broader statement we must go to his essay upon Victor Hugo's Romances<sup>3</sup>:—

The artistic result of a romance, what is left upon the memory by any really powerful and artistic novel, is something so complicated and refined that it is difficult to put a name upon it; and yet something as simple as nature.

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Vailima Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> R. L. S., *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*.



Take this with a passage of Mr Raleigh's:—

But, for the most part, the romantic kernel of a story is neither pure picture nor pure allegory, it can neither be painted nor moralised. It makes its most irresistible appeal neither to the eye that searches for form and colour, nor to the reason that seeks for abstract truth, but to the blood, to all that dim instinct of danger, mystery, and sympathy in things that is man's oldest inheritance—to the superstitions of the heart.<sup>1</sup>

In these two passages abstract definition touches its limits: would we go further, we must embark in illustration. And here we may note that Stevenson's own romances hardly serve as illustrations of a single wide effect, united though various, easy to apprehend though impossible to define. It is difficult to regard any one of his long stories—with the single exception of *Treasure Island*—as a whole. Recall a Stevenson; and instead of a complicated impression, compounded of an infinite variety of elements, there starts into the mind's eye a series of vivid episodes.

But the "artistic result" of—let us say—a Dickens<sup>2</sup> is very different. The impression is

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Raleigh, *Robert Louis Stevenson*.

<sup>2</sup> A master for whom Stevenson owned a profound and lasting admiration—an admiration which drew him to read *Pickwick* once (at least) every year. See also his remarks on *Martin Chuzzlewit* in a recently published letter.

multifarious as the remembrance of a year of crowded life, and yet one. For the great Charles conducts his stories as a general conducts a campaign: battalion after battalion is marshalled into position, and manoeuvres towards a common end; regiments are detached upon particular duties, advance, and retire; now, the light falls upon a solitary figure plodding by night towards its appointed bourne; and again, the darkness lifts and discovers a whole army corps lying in position. And when the campaign is done, the whole country has been subdued, and the reader is conscious of a certain vicarious exaltation and triumph. So with Scott—so with Dumas, the master of narrative art. So, in a lesser sense, with Thackeray; for Thackeray cared not much for plot and counterplot, and the scheme of circumstance: so long as his characters are alive and talking, he is content. Here is one reason why Stevenson must take his place below these masters. His field of operations is more narrowly circumscribed than theirs: it is as a master of romantic pictorial episode that we have first to consider him.

But, the spirit of romance resides not only in the embodiment of "character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be

remarkably striking to the mind's eye," but inspires and strikes through the most trivial incident—a momentary glance, an accidental word, a gleam of landscape. This ineluctable divinity will move in the very dust upon the street, peer from a beggar's rags, ride upon the wind, beckon from the fires of the dawn. It is not only when Lancelot of the Lake is ranging the lists, when Porthos dies amid whelming disaster, when the Black Knight thunders upon Front-de-Bœuf's castle doors, when Sydney Carton mounts the scaffold—not only when "Crusoe is recoiling from the footprint, Achilles shouting over against the Trojans, Ulysses bending the great bow,"—that the strong angel finds his avatar: but here, in the moonlit chamber opening upon the lagoons of old Venice, where Consuelo lived and sung; in the dark shop, buried deep in gloomy London, where Krook came by his hideous end, with none but Lady Jane to speed him; in the summer evening when Eugene Wrayburn voyaged leisurely up river upon a lover's errand; in the city hospice, whither Colonel Newcome creeps home to die,—here, also, lives the spirit of romance.

Born of that spirit, Stevenson was essentially and always a romantic; his very preaching is

but the romance of ethics; and so his work is informed with romance to the smallest detail, the least word. Hence the extraordinary distinction of his work. It is never dull. You may read all his books from end to end, but you will light upon no dull passage.

Romance, then, ranges from what has been called the Squalid-Picturesque to the highest regions of the ideal. Stevenson, beginning with romantic landscape, went on to the Squalid-Picturesque. When he was seven-and-twenty, living still in Edinburgh, he published *A Lodging for the Night*—an achievement savouring more of the study than of the open air, but none the less remarkable for that. Here are the same quality of vividness (what M. Marcel Schwob courageously calls romantic realism), and the same grim pleasure in the ugly, which are two of the marks of Stevenson. Thevenin Pensete, whose “bald head shone rosily in a garland of red curls” (“what right has a man to have red hair when he is dead?” says Villon), and Villon searching the dead jade in the snow, are things which stick in the memory.

In *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, another early story, there is the first fruit of that strange attraction, or prepossession, of the Closed Door, which used to exercise the mind of Stevenson.

One thing in life [he says] calls for another ; there is a fitness in events and places . . . Something, we feel, should happen ; we know not what, yet we proceed in quest of it . . . Some places speak distinctly. Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder ; certain old houses demand to be haunted ; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck.<sup>1</sup>

And we have M. Marcel Schwob ingeniously commenting thus:—

Comme le fondeur de cire perdue coule le bronze autour du “noyau” d’argile, Stevenson coule son histoire autour de l’image qu’il a créée. La chose est très visible dans *The Sire de Maltroit’s Door*. Le conte n’est qu’un essai d’explication de cette vision : une grosse porte de chêne, qui semble encastrée dans le mur, cède au dos d’un homme qui s’y appuie, tourne silencieusement sur des gonds huilés et l’enferme automatiquement dans des ténèbres inconnues.<sup>2</sup>

M. Schwob speaks in accents of unmistakable sympathy : he has tried the door business himself, in *les Portes de l’Opium*, and a terrifying fantasy it is. A theory so ingenious is always worth stating ; this one is very likely to be partly in accordance with the truth—but the truth itself we may not know. “C’est encore

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Schwob, “R. L. S.,” *New Review*, February 1895.

une porte qui hante d'abord l'imagination de Stevenson au début de *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*," M. Schwob goes on to say.

Terror waiting behind the Closed Door—that is the unseen image haunting the author's mind. As *Dr Jekyll* begins with the mystery behind the door opening upon the common street, "which was equipped with neither bell nor knocker, was blistered and distained," so it ends with the breaking down of the red baize door of the stricken doctor's cabinet, and the death of the Thing hiding behind that frail barrier. And terror lay waiting in ambush for Denis de Beau-lieu behind the Sire de Malétroit's door; but, for the damoiseau, there was provided a way of escape. The story is a *pastiche* of the mediæval; as for the Sire de Malétroit himself, he is pure Gothic, one with grotesque, and gargoyle, and the pictures in the bestiaries.

After Villon and the Sire de Malétroit comes *Will o' the Mill*, that "white-winged flight against the blue." The last scene, towards which the whole story is so artfully conducted, wherein all that has gone before chimes like an echo, thrills in the remembrance. The murky night air is crowded with the unseen dead, loaded with the perfume of heliotropes; the corner of the blind in the lighted window is

lifted and let fall; the voice of the dead cries out of the dark, the mysterious equipage waits beside the gate . . . And it is not only the magnificent climax we remember, but the flowers with which the way leading to this wonderful scene is all bestrewn:—

Some way up, a long grey village lay like a seam or a rag of vapour on a wooded hillside; and when the wind was favourable the sound of the church bells would drop down, thin and silvery, to Will. . . . The lilacs were already flowering, and the weather was so mild that the party took dinner under the trellis, with the noise of the river in their ears and the woods ringing about them with the songs of birds. . . . There was one corner of the road whence he could see the church-spire wedged into a crevice of the valley between sloping fir-woods, with a triangular snatch of plain by way of background. . .

There are not many romancers who border the road to fancy's bourne with pastures so enticing. And in the *New Arabian Nights*, not only the striking scenes, the main situations, thrill the curious reader—a lesser artist than Stevenson might have accomplished as much—but the very threads and colours in the pattern of the web are matter for delight.

Who can forget the advent of the Young Man with the Cream-tarts, or the entrance of the

President of the Suicide Club, or the sight of Mr Malthus turning up the ace of spades, or the apparition of Dr Noel in Mr Silas Q. Scudamore's bedchamber, or the spectacle of Mr Harry Hartley incontinently flinging himself and his bandbox over the wall, or the Dictator pouring the drug into the coffee under the green trees in his garden, or the mysterious coil of smoke continually vomited from the lone mansion of the Destroying Angel, or the Fair Cuban watching Mr Caulder perish horribly in the swamp—who, I say, that has once beheld them, does not vividly recall these scenes and incidents? These are the apotheoses of the story: they are all entirely romantic. And in each and all, it may be noted, there is something ugly, or sinister and daunting; for Stevenson, whose forefathers dealt with strong sensations, inherited a tradition that conjured with strong elements. But besides these great moments, contributing to the sum of their effect, there remain soberer passages.

Who was the “very tall black man, with a heavy stoop,” who rises to warn the hesitating remnant of the guests at Mr Morris's memorable assembly? His action in the story is negative; he has only to appear on the stage for a moment, to utter a word, and to vanish with the crowd;



yet his apparition is so artfully figured that he awakes a sense of mystery, and the effect of the whole design is sensibly heightened, as by a patch of blackness. And in the little interlude when the Reverend Mr Rolles, with the Rajah's Diamond in his pocket, visits his club in search of counsel, how admirable is the introduction of the *deus ex machinâ* :—

At length, in the smoking-room, up many weary stairs, he hit upon a gentleman of somewhat portly build and dressed with conspicuous plainness. He was smoking a cigar and reading the *Fortnightly Review* ; his face was singularly free from all sign of pre-occupation or fatigue ; and there was something in his air which seemed to invite confidence and to expect submission. The more the young clergyman scrutinised his features, the more he was convinced that he had fallen on one capable of giving pertinent advice.

"Sir," said he, "you will excuse my abruptness ; but I judge you from your appearance to be pre-eminently a man of the world."

"I have indeed considerable claims to that distinction," replied the stranger, laying aside his magazine with a look of mingled amusement and surprise.

"I, sir," continued the Curate, "am a recluse, a student, a creature of ink-bottles and patristic folios. A recent event has brought my folly vividly before my eyes, and I desire to instruct myself in life. By life," he added, "I do not mean Thackeray's novels ; but

the crimes and secret possibilities of our society, and the principles of wise conduct among exceptional events. I am a patient reader; can the thing be learnt in books?"

"You put me in a difficulty," said the stranger. "I confess I have no great notion of the use of books, except to amuse a railway journey; although, I believe, there are some very exact treatises on astronomy, the use of the globes, agriculture, and the art of making paper flowers. Upon the less apparent provinces of life I fear you will find nothing truthful. Yet stay," he added, "have you read Gaboriau?"

Mr Rolles's definition of life is instructive: there are many authors who, starting from the same theorem, will gaily improvise at large, under the impression that to improvise is to produce literature. Sir Walter Scott, they read, wrote his books before breakfast, and had little care to revise his manuscript. Stevenson—it is upon record—did not improvise; he toiled with an indefatigable industry; and so it is that even his minor passages are wrought with remarkable excellence. He had great endowments; but the faculty of quick and sufficient invention seems to have been denied him. Consider what he accomplished despite all disability: and the record remains both for a lesson and an encouragement.

The pose and manner assumed by the narra-

tor of the *New Arabian Nights* escape analysis in their subtlety. The historian is fooling, fooling excellent well; he knows it, he knows you know it, but his sedate demeanour never for an instant relaxes. The manner is doubtless reminiscent of Galland; nevertheless, to transliterate the Frenchman thus is a feat of singular dexterity. "He was in dress, for he had entertained the notion of visiting a theatre," says the historian, relating the adventure of Lieutenant Brackenbury Rich. The little pompous touch, the suggestion of formality, in that simple statement, convey the whole attitude,—an attitude which exactly fits the occasion, and whose fitness adds another pleasure to the narrative. But a pose, after all, is but a trick of legerdemain, an exercise which is often the resource of the young man, training himself in the use of another's weapons while his own equipment is forging. Stevenson, who was born with a talent for letters as well as a gift of romance, was a proficient in such gymnastic: it is even a question if the man of letters did not sometimes handicap, as well as help, the romancer.

To pass from the earlier, bookish stories and *The New Arabian Nights*, to the short stories and longer romances which he continued to bring forth until the last day of his life, is to find the

same assured, successful handling of the episode, with the same opulence of detail. *Thrawn Janet*, and Black Andie's tale of Tod Lapraik in *Catriona*, although they pale somewhat in lustre beside the master-achievement of its kind, *Wandering Willie's Tale* in *Redgauntlet*, are excellent witch-stories both. The earlier of the two, *Thrawn Janet*, which was written before *Treasure Island* (from whose publication, when he was thirty-two, dates the popular fame of Stevenson), is the better of the two; although the effect is confused by the introduction of the Black Man. Such a story must be either frankly supernatural or materially intelligible. Stevenson leaves us in doubt as to whether the Black Man were a real black man or Sathanas in person; but if the Black Man who gave the Reverend Mr Soulis such an ugly fright were nothing but a wandering irresponsible nigger (as the author seems to imply), the whole structure of the narrative is shaken. But the atmosphere and presentment of both stories are completely effective. There is another black man in *The Merry Men*, which was written about the same time as *Thrawn Janet*, who, again, has nothing to do with the story which the author had, apparently, set out to tell, but who suddenly rises out of the sea and finishes the anecdote in

his own way. Stevenson seems to have been spell-bound for a time by a diabolical suggestion to introduce a black into his stories. But, again, in *The Merry Men*, the atmosphere is perfectly rendered, the presentment eloquent and vivid.

The sun, which had been up some time, was already hot upon the neck ; the air was listless and thundery, although purely clear ; away over the north-west, where the isles lie thickliest congregated, some half a dozen small and ragged clouds hung together in a covey ; and the head of Ben Kyaw wore, not merely a few streamers, but a solid hood of vapour. There was a threat in the weather . . . As I walked upon the edge I could see far and wide over the sandy bottom of the bay ; the sun shone clear and green and steady in the deeps ; the bay seemed rather like a great transparent crystal, as one sees them in a lapidary's shop ; there was naught to show that it was water but an internal trembling, a hovering within of sun-glints and netted shadows, and now and then a faint lap and a dying bubble round the edge.

The storm which is to bring about the catastrophe is approaching ; there is the menace of tempest in the aspect of sea and sky and air ; and when that impression is rendered, there remains the indefinable presentiment of disaster, which must be directly expressed in so many words — “there was a threat in the

weather"—and the effect is complete. There is another impression of imminent storm, of a different effect, in the tremendous episode towards the end of *David Copperfield*. The comparison of the two descriptions is curious.

"Don't you think that," I asked the coachman, in the first stage out of London, "a very remarkable sky? I don't remember to have seen one like it."

"Nor I—not equal to it," he replied. "That's wind, sir. There'll be mischief done at sea, I expect, before long."

It was a murky confusion—here and there blotted with a colour like the colour of the smoke from damp fuel—of flying clouds tossed up into most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the clouds than there were depths below them to the bottom of the deepest hollows in the earth, through which the wild moon seemed to plunge headlong, as if, in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature, she had lost her way and were frightened. There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then, with an extraordinary great sound.

It is hardly fair to compare the respective merits of the two storm-pieces. Stevenson's was but a summer gale, sufficient to serve his purpose; while Dickens's memorable tempest was of a sort which befalls but once in fifty years or so, and which came as the part culmination of a great and lengthy work in-

volving multifarious issues. But, after due allowance is made for these distinctions, it is instructive to set Stevenson's whole account of the storm beside his elder's.

*Treasure Island*, which followed next in point of time after *The Merry Men*, was the first long story written by Stevenson. It was also, strictly speaking, the last, with the doubtful exception of *The Wrecker*. For, in *Treasure Island* incident and character and setting are subordinated to the business in hand, and the tale is rounded to completion, with a success that he did not afterwards attain. *Kidnapped* is an excellent story of adventure, but the plot is of slight construction that imposes very lax restrictions, so that it cannot fairly enter into comparison with *Treasure Island*. But for the little business of Uncle Ebenezer and the stolen inheritance, the tale would be pure picaresque, the persons of the story wandering in and out at will, the interest depending more upon character than brute incident. As it is, Alan Breck Stewart is the central figure, and they are his sayings and deeds of arms that go to make the chief interest: moreover, the tale breaks off, leaving more than one issue undecided; and the sequel, *Catriona*, is really made up of two short stories, the first concerning the Appin murder, the second,

the wooing of Catriona Drummond. *The Black Arrow*, again, is but a series of gallant episodes, strung together by the frailest thread of intrigue. *Prince Otto* stands in a different category. Originally designed as a play, a play it remains, set with palatial and landscape scenery of a romantic magnificence,—a magnificence so alluring that the attention is continually and forcibly diverted from the action. And *The Wrong Box*, which is a farce, also stands outside the question. *The Master of Ballantrae* is another example of the long story irremediably resolving itself into distinct episodes. In *The Wrecker* the real story does not begin until the one hundred and sixty-seventh page; and the tale goes all the way heavily overloaded with incidental episode. The form of the narrative, as the authors inform us in the *Epilogue*, was something of an experiment; and, as an experiment, it may without presumption be described as a gallant failure.

That brings us to the end of the books which make pretensions to the novel rank. In all, there are character, incident, and setting finely and episodically pictured; in all, save in *Treasure Island*, there is the singular impotence of the central idea to control and subordinate the whole; and in all, nevertheless, every phrase, even every word, of this astonishing artist is



worth reading for its own sake. Open a novel of Stevenson's at random, or recall its perusal, and beautiful or striking passages will isolate themselves naturally from the context. And many of such passages are like the sublimation of a dream. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a dream-fantasy from beginning to end. The extraordinary vividness of the presentment suggests the heightening touch of fever. Who but an inveterate dreamer could have imagined Dr Jekyll's horrible, involuntary transition?

I sat in the sun on a bench [says Dr Jekyll], the animal within me licking the chops of memory; the spiritual side a little drowsed, promising subsequent penitence, but not yet moved to begin. After all, I reflected, I was like my neighbours; and then I smiled, comparing myself with other men, comparing my active goodwill with the lazy cruelty of their neglect. And at the very moment of that vainglorious thought a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most deadly shuddering. These passed away, and left me faint; and then, as in its turn the faintness subsided, I began to be aware of a change in the temper of my thoughts, a greater boldness, a contempt of danger, a solution of the bonds of obligation. I looked down; my clothes hung formlessly on my shrunken limbs; the hand that lay on my knee was corded and hairy. I was once more Edward Hyde.

The apparition of David Pew in *Treasure Island*, the tap-tapping of the blind pirate's stick,<sup>1</sup> is like a horror of sleep. *Olalla* is all a dream; indeed, in his *Chapter on Dreams*,<sup>2</sup> the author has told us that the sudden frenzy of the Señorita was revealed to him in a dream. The entrance to Markheim of Mephistopheles (in *Markheim*), and the murderer's terror, belong to the shadowy land whose king is Unreason:—

Markheim stood and gazed at him with all his eyes. Perhaps there was a film upon his sight, but the outlines of the new-comer seemed to change and waver like those of the idols in the wavering candle-light of the shop; and at times he thought he knew him; and at times he thought he bore a likeness to himself; and always, like a lump of living terror, there lay in his bosom the conviction that this thing was not of the earth and not of God.

The curious intrusion into *The Misadventures of John Nicholson* of the murder in the house at Murrayfield is another case in point: the

<sup>1</sup> Commenting upon Stevenson's weird and daunting treatment of blindness as a property of fiction, in the figure of Pew, and that other sinister figure of the blind catechist, in *Kidnapped*, we may recall an extraordinary story of Sheridan Lefanu's, *The Mystery of Wyvern Chase*, and Dickens's blind man, Stagg, in *Barnaby Rudge*.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

body lying in the shuttered dining-room is quite out of place in a farce. Indeed, the utilisation of the poor dead shell of humanity as a property of farce must always inflict an outrage upon the feelings. This is the fatal objection to *The Wrong Box*: the mind begrudges consent to expedients so wanton. Even in *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*—those of Scheherezade, not those of Stevenson—the Hunchback was not really dead—there is nothing wrong with him but a misplaced fish-bone; and he comes to life again and lives happily ever afterwards.

The element of dream-fantasy lends an extraordinary potency to the work of Stevenson; but, like an enchanter's gift, the spell is only efficacious upon somewhat cruel conditions. For such fantasy as his demands a partial suspension of the sober reason for its operation; and hence it is that the work of Stevenson is not always wholly sane. To say so is only to mark a quality, for—

. . . I have seen the good ship sail  
Keel upward, and mast downward, in the heavens,  
And solid turrets topsy-turvy in air:  
And here is truth; . . .

The goddess of Literature is divine in this,  
that she welcomes to her table guests of

•

every degree, so they come decently apparelled. And Stevenson spared no expense in the equipment of his following. The most of his company are men of their hands, skilled in arms, subtle in strategy, adventurers all; of lovers, as of ladies, there are few. Of the two eternal factors in the destiny of man, warfare and love, he chiefly dealt with the first. Man's duel with fortune, rather than the duel of sex, was what interested him at first; and so the critics used to complain that Stevenson knew nothing of love, and was unacquainted with the nature of woman. And in *The Master of Ballantrae* it cannot be denied that Mrs Henry Durie is little more than a lost opportunity. No intelligent woman could have occupied Mrs Durie's position for a single day without, if not commanding, at least potently influencing, the situation. And *The Wrecker* deals entirely with the affairs of men, with the insidious and virulent wars of commerce: unless you make an exception of Mamie, who was quite commonplace, and a trifle shrewish into the bargain.

But, in *Prince Otto* we find the Prince unmistakably in love with his wife; if Madame von Rosen be no woman, but a figment in lace petticoats and black silk stockings, the male novelist may relinquish his pen, for the fields

of this life are no longer a place for his exercises; and as for Amalia Seraphina, Princess Cinderella,—while we may leave the Prince to give her his heart, we cannot but yield her admiration. And in *Catriona* Mr David Balfour is very much in love, in his dour Scots way; and Miss Barbara Grant loves Mr Balfour; even Catriona, simple as she is, perceives this clearly; and Catriona herself, although (I own) I do not entirely believe in her, is a pleasant young lady enough. Dick Naseby, in *The Story of a Lie*, is a young man hard hit, if ever a young man was; and he deserved a better fate than Esther Van Tromp prepared him. Read the chapter called *The Prodigal Father goes on from Strength to Strength*, and—though it scarce comes up to the splendour of its title—you shall find a true picture of a certain phase of passion. Read *The Great North Road*, that alluring fragment, and consider Nance Holdaway and Mr Archer: the romance of her life is beginning for Nance—alas! we know not how it ended. Read *The Young Chevalier*, another fragment of promise, and remark the presentment of the wine-seller's wife. There are few more romantic passages in Stevenson:—

They called the wine-seller Paradou. He was built more like a bullock than a man, huge in bone and

brawn, high in colour, and with a hand like a baby for size. Marie-Madeleine was the name of his wife ; she was of Marseilles, a city of entrancing women, nor was any fairer than herself. She was tall, being almost of a height with Paradou ; full-girdled, point-device in every form, with an exquisite delicacy in the face ; her nose and nostrils a delight to look at from the fineness of the sculpture, her eyes inclined a hair's-breadth inward, her colour between dark and fair, and laid on even like a flower's. A faint rose dwelt in it, as though she had been found unawares bathing, and had blushed from head to foot. She was of a grave countenance, rarely smiling ; yet it seemed to be written upon every part of her that she rejoiced in life. Her husband loved the heels of her feet and the knuckles of her fingers ; he loved her like a glutton and a brute ; his love hung about her like an atmosphere : one that came by chance into the wine-shop was aware of that passion ; and it might be said that by the strength of it the woman had been drugged or spell-bound. She knew not if she loved or loathed him ; he was always in her eyes like something monstrous,—monstrous in his love, monstrous in his person, horrific but imposing in his violence ; and her sentiment swung back and forward from desire to sickness. But the mean, where it dwelt chiefly, was an apathetic fascination, partly of horror ; as of Europa in mid-ocean with her bull.<sup>1</sup>

And, for a last consideration, there remains

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Young Chevalier*.

the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston*, upon which the author was at work when death took him. The story itself, as it stands, is but the first sketch in the clay; with that we need have no concern; had the author lived to complete his work, no doubt the effect—whatever it was—would have been marred by no inconsistency. As it stands, in the chapter *A Leaf from Christina's Psalm-book*, he has achieved a little masterpiece of romance. In that scene of lovers' meeting, wrought with a beauty and delicacy that, did we seek comparisons, would compel us to recall the name of the artist who told of the meeting of Richard Feveril and Lucy beside the river, Stevenson touched perfection.

. . . In the last weeks of his life [Mr Colvin tells us] he attacked the task [*Weir of Hermiston*] again, in a sudden heat of inspiration, and worked at it ardently and without interruption until the end came. No wonder if during these weeks he was sometimes aware of a tension of the spirit difficult to sustain. "How can I keep this pitch?" he is reported to have said after finishing one of the chapters; and all the world knows how that frail organism, overtaxed so long, in fact betrayed him in mid-effort.

So Stevenson's courage carried him to the end; and he fell, like his elders, Dickens and Thackeray, leaving a task unaccomplished.

## VII.

## THE NOVELIST.

He was a type-hunter among mankind. He despised small game and insignificant personalities, whether in the shape of dukes or bagmen, letting them go by like sea-weed; but show him a refined or powerful face, let him hear a plangent or a penetrating voice, fish for him with a living look in some one's eye, a passionate gesture, a meaning or ambiguous smile, and his mind was instantaneously awakened.—R. L. S., *The Story of a Lie*.

ROMANCE (as Mr Raleigh has pointed out<sup>1</sup>) is an attribute of man's nature—a passion, whose imperious desires may be denied or indulged, but whose nature suffers no observable process of evolution. But the gift of apprehending character, like an ear for music, requires an assiduous cultivation; the constant elements which make up the human constitution, with their innumerable combinations, with the continual modifications wrought upon them by time and chance and circumstance, must be observed with an

<sup>1</sup> W. A. Raleigh, *Robert Louis Stevenson*.



unwearying vigilance, and learned by heart like a lesson. Charles Dickens was possessed by "inimitable" genius; but there resides a difference, by the whole width of heaven, between the characterisation of *Nicholas Nickleby* and the portraiture in—let us say—*Our Mutual Friend* or *Edwin Drood*. And in the difference between Stevenson's earlier character studies and the transfigured portraiture of *The New Arabian Nights*, and his three desperadoes of *The Ebb-Tide* and the living men and women of *Weir of Hermiston*, there is implied half a lifetime of laborious study. He began with such sentimental adumbrations as *An old Scots Gardener*, and *John Todd the Shepherd*;<sup>1</sup> and it is already a long step forward when he recreates Master Francis Villon in *A Lodging for the Night*. That sinister figure grew directly out of his historical studies; so did Tabary, Thevenin Pensete, Dom Nicholas, Montigny, the Seigneur de Brisetout, Denis de Beaulieu, and the Sieur de Malétroit; and, considering that the author's fancy was nourished only upon the arid figments of printed records, the force of the presentment is remarkable. Figures of historical romance like these exist upon a convention of their own; they have but to take their

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

place in the intrigue of the piece, and to perform certain definite actions or feats of valour, or to embody certain definite sentiments; and, so they be suitably equipped with the necessary qualities—so they are brave or cowardly, subtle, witty, or amorous, as the case require—we ask no more. It is in the extraordinary magnificence of endowment with which he gifts his creations, combined with his unrivalled mastery of the “enchanting art of narrative,” that makes the giant strength of Alexander Dumas. It is the same spirit which inspires the mediæval romances of Sir Walter Scott; whereas, in the romances of that maker which deal with a nearer generation, the element of idiosyncrasy—a thing inconsistent with pure romance—begins to count as a factor in the general effect. And the same spirit, pushed to extreme issues, inspired Victor Hugo, the hunch-backed, essentially histrionic descendant of Sir Walter. For the well-heads of this spring we may trace backward to the miracle-plays and the *Morte Darthur*; and the curious may follow the clue until it lead them deep into the classic groves of antiquity.

If we except the youthful sketches, the heroes of philosophical allegory, and the characters in *Providence and the Guitar*—a story built upon

an experience of the author's recounted in *An Inland Voyage*—the elder figures in Stevenson's gallery, the vagabonds and soldiers in *A Lodging for the Night* and *The Sieur de Malétroit's Door*, and the fantastic company of the *New Arabian Nights*, fall into the category of a particular convention. But in *The Story of a Lie*, written when the author was twenty-nine, we are suddenly brought face to face with a study from the life. The story is not a particularly good story, as Stevensonian stories go; but Dick Naseby is a real young man, despite his slight Meredithian flavour; and the Admiral is a real, red-nosed, and entirely worthless old scamp. Stevenson ever loved the Squalid-Picturesque; and although Dick and Esther are the chief persons of the story, it is the Admiral who figures most conspicuously, and they are the Prodigal Father's red nose and ineffectual colour-box which linger in the memory. And in *The Pavilion on the Links* (which was written during Stevenson's first sojourn in America, after his Amateur Emigrant experiences, and which follows *The Story of a Lie* in point of time) it is neither Northmour's wild moods nor Clara's beauty that is the dominant impression, but the character and person of the absconding banker, Bernard Huddleston:—

He had a long and sallow countenance, surrounded by a long red beard and side-whiskers. His broken nose and high cheek-bones gave him somewhat the air of a Kalmuck, and his light eyes shone with the excitement of a high fever. He wore a skull-cap of black silk ; a huge Bible lay open before him on the bed, with a pair of gold spectacles in the place, and a pile of other books lay on a stand by his side. The green curtains lent a cadaverous shade to his cheek ; and, as he sat propped on pillows, his great stature was painfully hunched, and his head protruded till it overhung his knees.

There is the portrait ; and the character of a proper scoundrel is depicted in colours so forcible that, in spite of the fine romantic setting, the repulsive figure of Bernard Huddlestone comes near to usurping the whole picture.

About this time were written the studies of Thoreau and Samuel Pepys, studies of a shrewd and delicate discrimination. There was something of the transcendental Thoreau, something of Pepys the indefatigable hedonist, in Stevenson ; and so in these essays we have, not two men of parts but, three talented personages analysed with eloquence and insight.

And then, when Stevenson was thirty, came *Treasure Island*, which marked a tide in his affairs which—in a word—led on to fortune. To name *Treasure Island* is to recall John Silver,

that little masterpiece of characterisation. It is much to the praise of the artist's powers of restraint that he was able to keep this opulent personality within the bounds of the story, and so preserve an unity of effect. He did accomplish this feat; and John Silver, in his measure, is to *Treasure Island* what Chicot the Jester is to the Valois cycle of romances, and especially to *les Quarante-cinq* in that cycle. Both heroes play their part to perfection; and, in both cases, their part is generously conceived, so that character and opportunity rise and fall in striking and harmonious combination. The delineation of Cap'n Silver marks the point of Stevenson's attainment to a high degree of proficiency in his art. After much bookish study of human life as refracted through the temperaments of other men, he has come to consider life with his own eyes; and the formidable apparition of the seafaring man with one leg stands (balancing on his crutch) at the head of a considerable society, which lives and moves amid a landscape of singular beauty, a province reconquered in the many-citied land of the unseen.

*Treasure Island* depends not at all for its interest upon the novelty of the theme. The heme is the old, stock theme of pirates and

buried treasure. It is the personality of the pirates and the way they set about their business which (as in life) fascinate the reader. In such a story, were the element of character reduced to a set of monotoned abstract qualities, the story might still remain an excellent story. There is little enough individuality of character in Poe's sombre invention of *The Gold Bug*; yet the story is a model of its kind. And it is upon record that the readers of *Young Folks' Paper*, for whose delectation *Treasure Island* was serially published, cared little for Silver and his crew. "Character to the boy," says Stevenson, talking of *Treasure Island*, "is a sealed book"—a statement which contains a half-truth. But, character to the grown person is at least as interesting as the romance of circumstance; or, to put the matter another way, a person who does not care for the one will probably relish the other. And Stevenson brought down both kinds of bird in *Treasure Island*.

In *The Black Arrow*, which followed *Treasure Island*, the characterisation is necessarily more conventional. For one thing, the period of which the story treats is highly remote; and for another, the author was bent only upon amusing boys and girls; whereas, in *Treasure Island*, he was singly occupied in amusing himself. And

yet, this mediæval rout of nobles, priests, men-at-arms, and outlaws is marshalled before us (in a lingo artfully contrived out of *The Paston Letters*) with some of the lineaments and the accents of life;<sup>1</sup> and the author, profoundly interested in character as he is, cannot withhold his hand from adding little traits of idiosyncrasy.

"An ye prepare so carefully," said Dick [he is alone with Lawless in the outlaw's cave], "I have here some papers that, for mine own sake, and the interest of those that trusted me, were better left behind than found upon my body. Where shall I conceal them, Will?"

"Nay," replied Lawless, "I will go forth into the wood and whistle me three verses of a song; meanwhile do you bury them where you please, and smooth the sand upon the place."

"Never!" cried Richard. "I trust you, man. I were base indeed if I not trusted you."

"Brother, y' are but a child," replied the old outlaw, pausing and turning his face upon Dick from the threshold of the den. "I am a kind old Christian, and no traitor to men's blood, and no sparer of mine own in a friend's jeopardy. But, fool child, I am a thief by trade and birth and habit. If my bottle were empty and my mouth dry, I would rob you, dear child, as sure as I love, honour, and admire your parts and person! Can it be clearer spoken? No."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson himself considered Richard Crookback to be "really a very spirited puppet."

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *The Black Arrow*.

Between the first series of *The New Arabian Nights*, written when the author was twenty-eight, and the second series, elapsed an interval of six years; in that interval were written—*The Story of a Lie*, *Thrawn Janet*, *The Merry Men*, *Treasure Island*, *The Treasure of Franchard*, *The Black Arrow*, *Prince Otto*, and the excellent fragment, never completed, of *The Great North Road*. Of these, *The Story of a Lie*, *Treasure Island*, *Prince Otto*, and *The Great North Road*, were largely built upon motives of character or passion. And in the second series of *The New Arabian Nights*, though there be something lacking of the gaiety and freshness of the earlier entertainments, there is an irresistible element of individuality. We are conscious that the persons of the story are flesh and blood; and, whereas the misadventures of Francis Q. Scudamore or the Reverend Mr Rolles excite sympathy no more than do the mock disasters which befall Harlequin or Pantaloon, when we read of the degrading plight of Mr Edward Challoner, the devotion of Harry Desborough, the fallen fortunes of Mr Theophilus Godall, even the ghastly situation of the explosive gentleman with the chin-beard, we are afflicted with something like commiseration; and they are the artistic experiments in house agency of Mr Paul



Somerset—incidents arising directly from that gentleman's peculiar tastes and character—that remain in the memory, rather than the cataclysmic inventions of Zero. And, while my Lady Vandeleur, Madame Zephyrine, and the Dictator's daughter pass with a flutter of perfumed skirts and are gone, the fair Cuban and the Honourable Mrs Luxmore are ladies to be seriously reckoned with. And the final chapter of *The Dynamiters* is neither more nor less than a scene in a comedy of manners.

It is this lively faculty of individual creation, or, if you prefer it, of expert delineation—'tis all one—that gives to Stevenson's work a great part of its interest; and yet, the same faculty is constantly bringing him into difficulties. *The Wrecker*, for instance, with its great assemblage of diverse characters, its admirable sketches of student-life in Paris, drawn from Stevenson's experiences in his youth—its "mingling of races and classes in the dollar-hunt, the fiery and not quite unromantic struggle for existence, with its changing trades and scenery, and two types in particular, that of the American handy-man of business and that of the Yankee merchant sailor"—with all this *The Wrecker* might have been an admirable novel of character and manners, just as it might have been an admirable

story of adventure. But, as it stands, that long bustling narrative, stuffed full of clever work, fails of its effect as a whole. There is a deal about the students in Paris—and not a word of it has anything to do with the main intrigue: the whole troupe is presently hurried from the stage, and we hear no more of it; there is a vast amount of the San Francisco business, which only touches upon the story at one or two isolated points; and the central interest of the book does not open until Norris Carthew begins to spin his yarn at the end of the second volume. In a word, the book is a short story, with the material for three or four novels of manners thrown in. Remark the figures of Loudon Dodd (degraded creature though he be), Jim Pinkerton, Nares, Hemstead, Tommy Hadden, and the three skippers, Bostock, Wicks, and Trent; and observe the whole crowd of subsidiary characters, all drawn to the life. The conventional prototypes of many estimable acquaintances in fiction are known to all the world; but Stevenson's people, in common with the delineations of but two or three contemporary writers, step into the book in their habit as they live. And once there, they often prefer to exist by and for themselves, rather than become the mere vehicles of a story.

*Prince Otto* (begun as *Semiramis: a Tragedy*, when the author was in his teens, taken up again when he was twenty-nine, rewritten five or six times, and finished several years afterwards), again, which might have become a play, or a story of adventure in Seaboard Bohemia, or a love-story, is all these things in part, and none of them altogether. We are led at first to expect a romantically ingenious plot; still upon the trail of intrigue, we begin to think the book is really drama after all, the characters are so insistently individual; then we return to the story—and by that time the book is near its end; and, despite the wonderful chapter of the flight of the Princess, we turn the last page with a feeling not far from disappointment. We had been led to expect so much, you see. And, amid all that brilliant company, the sardonic figure of Sir John Crabtree is most clearly defined, although he plays but a subordinate part in the main design.

But when the reader comes to the last sentence in *The Great North Road*, begun by Stevenson while he was living at Bournemouth, when he had finished *Prince Otto*, he is conscious of a different feeling—he is painfully desirous to know the end of this seductive fragment. For, here is the beginning of a love-story indeed,

not to mention the highwayman business; and Nance Holdaway is a real woman, sincerely entertaining sentiments, new to her experience, towards the mysterious and attractive Mr Archer.

Mr Archer, disclaiming any thought of flattery, turned off to other subjects, and held her all through the wood in conversation, addressing her with an air of perfect sincerity, and listening to her answers with every mark of interest. Had open flattery continued, Nance would have soon found refuge in good sense; but the more subtle lure she could not suspect, much less avoid. It was the first time she had ever taken part in a conversation illuminated by any ideas. All was then true that she had heard and dreamed of gentlemen; they were a race apart, like deities knowing good and evil. And then there burst upon her soul a divine thought, hope's glorious sunrise: since she could understand, since it seemed that she too, even she, could interest this sorrowful Apollo, might she not learn? or was she not learning? Would not her soul awake and put forth wings? Was she not, in fact, an enchanted princess, waiting but a touch to become royal? She saw herself transformed, radiantly attired, but in the most exquisite taste: her face grown longer and more refined; her tint etherealised; and she heard herself with delighted wonder talking like a book.<sup>1</sup>

We perceive there was much laid in store for

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Great North Road*.

poor Nance that never came to pass, since her creator neglected to fulfil her destinies; for, in the capital opening of *The Great North Road*, there are evident indications of the sort of plot, more or less intricate, which attracts the reader's attention from the outset with an element of mystery—a method which Stevenson usually rejected. Nance Holdaway is so well drawn, that, had all her story been related, it is likely she would have taken her place with the rest of those men and women, the leaders of the Stevensonian society, who stand forth from among their fellows, and in whose conversation we forget the business upon which they are ostensibly engaged.

As Francis Villon, in *A Lodging for the Night*, the Admiral, in *The Story of a Lie*, Bernard Huddleston, in *The Pavilion on the Links*, John Silver, in *Treasure Island*, Sir John Crabtree, in *Prince Otto*, Jim Pinkerton and Captain Nares, in *The Wrecker*, do stand forth and clamantly engross attention: so David Balfour, the dour Scot who falls into dire misfortune, and then in love, and who took both adventures very hardly; Alan Breck Stewart, the “bonny fighter” and constant comrade; Mr Utterson, that inestimable lawyer; Michael Finsbury, the lawyer of a type extremely different; James Durie, Master

of Ballantrae; Huish, the vile cockney; Wiltshire, the South Sea trader; Hermiston, the Hanging Judge, Kirstie, his servant, and Christina, beloved of his son: disengage themselves from the rest of the Stevensonian romance and farce, from the ranks of their inferiors and the coil of circumstance, and dwell in knowledge like people with whom we have kept house.

And all the men, save two or three, have this in common: their characters own something sinister, and often repellent. Delight in the Squalid-Picturesque drew Stevenson in his youth to limn the dead rascal, Villon; in maturer age he gropes in a city sewer, and gives us Huish; and Huish—his dialect apart—is a masterpiece of portraiture. The rest of his men are mainly adventurers, or grave personages dealing with large affairs; for, as I have said, Stevenson liked better to paint the duel of fortune than the duel of sex; and it is perhaps inevitable that one side of life, presented so entirely to the exclusion of the other, should take on a rougher, more harsh, more sanguinary aspect than it wears in nature. In *The Ebb-Tide*, written at Apia in the last years of his lifetime, the experienced artist seems to have become conscious of this; and, although Huish is a thing to spit upon, the captain, with his searing memory of

his child—"Adar, only daughter of Captain John Davis and Mariar his wife, aged five"—and Herrick, writing to his sweetheart, establish a sense of kinship that makes an invaluable relief in the whole effect of that brilliant design.

Stevenson's deliberate omission of "the other side of life," of the element of feminine character, in the most of his books, is the more remarkable when we consider the women whom he did create. There is Barbara Grant, who coquetted with the stockish David with an elegance and skill that deserved a better success; there is Catriona Drummond, though she, it is true, is little more than a piece of petticoated innocence with a pair of grey eyes; and then, there are Christina Elliott and her aunt Kirstie in *Weir of Hermiston*. To peruse *A Leaf from Christina's Psalm-book* from beginning to end, and *At the Weaver's Stone* (the last chapter, broken midway, that Stevenson ever wrote), is to rise up inspired with a deep delight in the presentment of scenes conceived in the high vein of romance. Stevenson divined the inmost, wordless thoughts of Christina's heart, when she went to her chamber to change her stockings to the pink. He read her soul like an open page, as she sat and waited for Archie Weir to come to her at the Weaver's Stone. And in

Kirstie Elliott, he began a monumental figure, eloquent of tragedy, a type of inexpugnable sorrow. Peculiar treasure passing unclaimed and unregarded, secret riches wasting all unused—here is a common fate, a destiny more cruel than Desdemona's; and such a fate was Kirstie Elliott's.

There is no more gay and airy trifling, no more excellent fooling—no more reckless farce—in *The Ebb-Tide* and *Weir of Hermiston*; the novelist is in earnest, he is giving all he has; and when it comes to this point with him Christina, and the Hanging Judge, and Kirstie Elliott rise into being; and in them is their creator's memory honoured.

And besides these, what a gallant, motley regiment wears the badge of Stevenson! Princes and cabmen, murderers and ministers of state, buccaneers and princesses, beggarmen and millionaires, witches and clergymen, Yankee sharpers and Poor Jack, Highlander, Lowlander, and Cockney, pass in a vivid procession, with passionate gesture and silent, eloquent speech, into the city of their ultimate habitation, founded in the land of dreams.



## VIII.

## THE LIMNER OF LANDSCAPE.

Nature then . . .  
 To me was all in all—I cannot paint  
 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion : the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite ; . . .

—WORDSWORTH.

To the youthful Stevenson, intensely preoccupied with the desire to write, to make something in words ("that was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself"<sup>1</sup>), the study of landscape offered, not only a vehicle of delicate and pleasurable sensations but, a ready and congenial choice of subjects.

With Wordsworth and the poets of his time [says Mr J. A. Symonds, propounding a neat theory in his

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

essay on Landscape],<sup>1</sup> nature owns something correspondent to man's consciousness. A positive mythology, importing the imagination into science—if I may so express this revolution in thought about the universe—replaces the anthropomorphism of the Greeks, and fills at last the vacuum created by mediæval theology.

To attempt to show in what the inheritance bequeathed by Wordsworth and his successors consisted, would carry me far beyond my scope. Such as it was, Stevenson entered into his heritage; and what chiefly concerns us is his use of that appreciation of landscape for its own sake, which makes an integral part of modern art. He studied letters together with landscape, and he sees with the refracted vision of other seers as well as with his own eyes. Not his the elemental, savage delight in nature of Richard Jeffreys, "the Leatherstocking of literature," nor the austere, philosophical regard of Thoreau and his fellow-gymnosophists. Rather was his passion for nature's beauty sensuous in kind; and like many another young man, even the Prophet of the Lakes himself, it seems that he entered to his proper field of minute and patient study, the study of mankind, through the tremendous portals of the mountain and the sun-

<sup>1</sup> John Addington Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*.

rise. But, when the inevitable change had passed, and the dainty landscape-limner had flourished and blossomed into the creator and romantic whom we know, he still clung to his first love; and the great effects of changing sky and deep forest, smiling champaign, rolling hills, and beating seas, which once wholly engaged the artist, serve now as the magnificent back-grounds to his designs.

So, in the beginning, we find an eager, thread-paper, sensitive youth wandering the fields, with—as he says—“always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas.”<sup>1</sup>

Here are his notes of one such scene, *An Autumn Effect*, from an essay published in *The Portfolio* in 1875, when the author was twenty-five:—

A pall of grey cloud covered the sky, and its colour reacted on the colour of the landscape. Near at hand, indeed, the hedgerow trees were still fairly green,

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

shot through with bright autumnal yellows, bright as sunshine. But a little way off, the solid bricks of woodland that lay squarely on slope and hill-top were not green, but russet and grey, and ever less russet and more grey as they drew off into the distance. As they drew off into the distance, also, the woods seemed to mass themselves together, and lay thin and straight, like clouds, upon the limit of one's view . . . The sun came out before I had been long on my way; and as I had got by that time to the top of the ascent, and was now treading a labyrinth of confined by-roads, my whole view brightened considerably in colour, for it was the distance only that was grey and cold, and the distance I could see no longer. Overhead there was a wonderful carolling of larks which seemed to follow me as I went . . . A few hundred yards farther, and, passing through a gap in the hedge, I began to go down hill through a pretty extensive tract of young beeches. I was soon in shadow myself, but the afternoon sun still coloured the upmost boughs of the wood, and made a fire over my head in the autumnal foliage . . . There was something about the atmosphere that brought all sights and sounds home to one with a singular purity, so that I felt as if my senses had been washed with water.<sup>1</sup>

This epicurean young gentleman—"artist and colourman in words"—is enjoying himself extremely, you see; and it is a question which affords him the greater pleasure, the contem-

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*.

plation of these manifold, serene beauties, or the setting them in precious words. But, there is another side to the picture. The epicure whose "senses had been washed with water"—a deft phrase—presently wakes up to a different sensation, which is recorded with the sort of quaint solemnity that makes part of the perennial charm of youth.

(*Added the next morning.*) He who indulges habitually in the intoxicating pleasures of imagination, for the very reason that he reaps a greater pleasure than others, must resign himself to a keener pain, a more intolerable and utter prostration. It is quite possible, and even comparatively easy, so to enfold oneself in pleasant fancies that the realities of life may seem but as the white snow-shower in the street, that only gives a relish to the swept hearth and lively fire within. By such means I have forgotten hunger, I have sometimes eased pain, and I have invariably changed into the most pleasant hours of the day those very vacant and idle seasons which would otherwise have hung most heavily upon my hand . . . Do not suppose that I am exaggerating when I talk about all pleasures seeming stale. To me, at least, the edge of almost everything is put on by imagination; and even nature, in these days when the fancy is drugged and useless, wants half the charm it has in better moments. I can no longer see satyrs in the thicket, or picture a highwayman riding down the lane. The fiat of indifference has gone forth: I am vacant, unprofitable: a

leaf on a river with no volition and no aim : a mental drunkard the morning after an intellectual debauch. Yes, I have a more subtle opium in my own mind than any apothecary's drug ; but it has a sting of its own, and leaves me as flat and helpless as does the other.<sup>1</sup>

But these are only the pains of a beginner ; the faculty whose exercise seems to entail such penalties is presently to become the absorbing preoccupation of existence : meanwhile, we may observe the author consoling himself thereby, as he puts his little record of emotions into nice English.

And meanwhile, Stevenson follows the Scots tradition, and goes to France, and lives in the forest of Fontainebleau with the painters, and develops theories upon style. Here, from his writings at five- or six-and-twenty, is a picture, entirely French in effect, and rather like Millet :—

Perhaps the reader knows already the aspect of the great levels of the Gâtinais, where they border with the wooded hills of Fontainebleau. Here and there a few grey rocks creep out of the forest as if to sun themselves. Here and there a few apple-trees stand together on a knoll. The quaint, undignified tartan of a myriad small fields dies out into the distance ;

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*.

the strips blend and disappear; and the dead flat lies forth open and empty, with no accident save perhaps a thin line of trees or faint church-spire against the sky. Solemn and vast at all times, in spite of pettiness in the near details, the impression becomes more solemn and vast towards evening. The sun goes down, a swollen orange, as it were into the sea. A blue-clad peasant rides home, with a harrow smoking behind him among the dry clods. Another still works with his wife in their little strip. An immense shadow fills the plain; these people stand in it up to their shoulders; and their heads, as they stoop over their work and rise again, are relieved from time to time against the golden sky.<sup>1</sup>

That is well written; so far as landscape may be rendered in prose, that scene of the sun-setting upon the flat, cultivated champaign is rendered. And, throughout the *Inland Voyage*, and the travels in the Cevennes which followed his French experiences, the landscape is presented in a series of alluring vignettes. By this time Stevenson is master of his trade so far as expression goes; he wields the English tongue with a fastidious and delighted mastery. Wherever he goes, in all quarters of the world, he paints these word-pictures for our delectation. Here is one observed in America from the windows

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Juvenilia*.

of the emigrant train, when, in 1879 (at twenty-nine), he is playing the amateur emigrant :—

The train was then, in its patient way, standing halted in a by-track. It was a clear, moonlit night ; but the valley was too narrow to admit the moonshine direct, and only a diffused glimmer whitened the tall rocks and relieved the blackness of the pines. A hoarse clamour filled the air ; it was the continuous plunge of a cascade somewhere near at hand among the mountains. The air struck chill, but tasted good and vigorous in the nostrils—a fine, dry, old mountain atmosphere . . . When I awoke next morning, I was puzzled for a while to know if it were day or night, for the illumination was unusual. I sat up at last, and found we were grading slowly downward through a long snowshed ; and suddenly we shot into an open ; and before we were swallowed into the next length of wooden tunnel, I had one glimpse of a huge pine-forested ravine upon my left, a foaming river, and a sky already coloured with the fires of dawn.<sup>1</sup>

And here, from the same continent, is a marvellous night-piece, written a year or so later :—

The sky itself was of a ruddy, powerful, nameless, changing colour, dark and glossy like a serpent's back. The stars, by innumerable millions, stuck boldly forth like lamps. The milky way was bright, like a moonlit cloud ; half heaven seemed milky way. The greater

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Amateur Emigrant*.



luminaries shone each more clearly than a winter's moon. Their light was dyed in every sort of colour—red, like fire; blue, like steel; green, like the tracks of sunset; and so sharply did each stand forth in its own lustre that there was no appearance of that flat, star-spangled arch we know so well in pictures, but all the hollow of heaven was one chaos of contesting luminaries—a hurly-burly of stars. Against this the hills and rugged tree-tops stood out redly dark.

You will not often match that for a piece of pictorial prose. And we read of no inglorious collapse next morning! The habit of imaginative observation has become a part of the artist, like his appetite; and it is upon the exercise of the one, as much as the other, that he continues to exist.

And in all the novels and stories of Stevenson the landscape co-exists and counts in the story with the characters; and sometimes, as in *Prince Otto*, the men and women are apt to look a trifle insignificant beside the gorgeous spectacle of the natural earth. It is possible to make the best of stories without a particle of landscape, save the merest stage-properties, as in Fielding and Thackeray; or you may, if you choose, include as factors in your design the aspect and operations of the visible universe, as in Scott, or Hugo, or Dickens. But Stevenson would prob-

ably have found it very difficult to work upon the former method, save in the construction of plays; and when he was employed upon that business, he collaborated with Mr Henley. So, in all his novels, we have romantic settings and beautiful, sunbright (to use an epithet dear to him) vignettes. Take, for instance, the sea-piece from *The Pavilion on the Links*, written during his American sojourn:—

The pavilion stood on an even space ; a little behind it, the wood began in a hedge of elders huddled together by the wind ; in front a few tumbled sand-hills stood between it and the sea . . . The district was alive with rabbits, and haunted by gulls which made a continual piping about the pavilion. On summer days the outlook was bright, and even glad-some ; but at sundown in September, with a high wind, and a heavy surf rolling in close along the links, the place told of nothing but dead mariners and sea disaster. A ship beating to windward on the horizon, and a huge truncheon of wreck half-buried in the sands at my feet, completed the innuendo of the scene.<sup>1</sup>

Note that neither the ship nor the wreckage has anything to do with the story, any more than the cream-tarts had any immediate relation to the Suicide Club. It is worth remark, too,

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Pavilion on the Links*.

how large a part the picturesque aspect and configuration of the place, the situation of the pavilion, and the condition of the weather play in the story. The setting, to say the least, is stronger than the love interest.

But, in *Treasure Island*, the background is contrived to admiration: here is a single instance:—

It was one January morning, very early—a pinching frosty morning—the cove all grey with hoar-frost, the ripple lapping softly on the stones, the sun still low and only touching the hill-tops and shining far to seaward. The captain had risen earlier than usual, and set out down the beach, his cutlass swinging under the broad skirts of the old blue coat, his brass telescope under his arm, his hat tilted back upon his head. I remember his breath hanging like smoke in his wake as he strode off . . .<sup>1</sup>

The scene is set for imminent peril, you see; there is a threat in the windless, grey winter morning, when the old buccaneer goes down to keep his accustomed watch for the seafaring man with one leg.

The persons of the drama, in *Prince Otto*, move amid landscape and scenery beautiful with crag and forest, running brooks and palaces and gardens. *Prince Otto* should be twice perused, once for the story and again for the landscape. To

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Treasure Island*.

endeavour to combine the two is to spoil the effect of both. The errant Prince, rising early, walks in his host's garden, and contemplates the tiny river running through that Arcadian estate :—

The stream was a break-neck, boiling, highland river. Hard by the farm, it leaped a little precipice in a thick grey-mare's tail of twisted filaments, and then lay and worked and bubbled in a lynn. Into the middle of this quaking pool a rock protruded, shelving to a cape ; and thither Otto scrambled and sat down to ponder. Soon the sun struck through the screen of branches and thin early leaves that made a hanging bower above the fall ; and the golden lights and flitting shadows fell upon and marbled the surface of that seething pot ; and rays plunged deep among the turning waters ; and a spark, as bright as a diamond, lit upon the swaying eddy. It began to grow warm where Otto lingered, warm and heady ; the lights swam, weaving their maze across the shaken pool ; on the impending rock, reflections danced like butterflies ; and the air was fanned by the waterfall as by a swinging curtain.<sup>1</sup>

And here is a garden scene, where the Prince is discovered at a certain crucial moment in his life :—

Thence he proceeded alone to where, in a round clearing, a copy of Gian Bologna's Mercury stood tiptoe in the twilight of the stars. The night was

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Prince Otto*.

warm and windless. A shaving of new moon had lately arisen ; but it was still too small and too low down in heaven to contend with the immense host of lesser luminaries ; and the rough face of the earth was drenched with starlight. Down one of the alleys, which widened as it receded, he could see a part of the lamplit terrace where a sentry silently paced, and beyond that a corner of the town with interlacing street lights. But all around him the young trees stood mystically blurred in the dim shine ; and in the stock-still quietness the up-leaping god appeared alive.<sup>1</sup>

And here is an illustration from what is, perhaps, in some ways the most excellent piece of romantic description in Stevenson, the chapter in *Prince Otto* where the discrowned Princess wanders by night in the forest :—

The early evening had fallen chill, but the night was now temperate ; out of the recesses of the wood there came mild airs as from a deep and peaceful breathing ; and the dew was heavy on the grass and the tight-shut daisies. This was the girl's first night under the naked heaven ; and now that her fears were overpast, she was touched to the soul by its serene amenity and peace. Kindly the host of heaven blinked down upon that wandering Princess ; and the honest brook had no words but to encourage her.

At last she began to be aware of a wonderful

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Prince Otto*,

revolution, compared to which the fire of Mittwalden Palace was but the crack and flash of a percussion-cap. The countenance with which the pines regarded her began insensibly to change; the grass too, short as it was, and the whole winding staircase of the brook's course, began to wear a solemn freshness of appearance. And this slow transfiguration reached her heart, and played upon it, and transpierced it with a serious thrill. She looked all about; the whole face of nature looked back, brimful of meaning, finger on lip, leaking its glad secret. She looked up. Heaven was almost emptied of stars. Such as still lingered shone with a changed and waning brightness, and began to faint in their stations. And the colour of the sky was the most wonderful; for the rich blue of the night had now melted and softened and brightened; and there had succeeded in its place a hue that has no name, and that is never seen but as the herald of morning. "O!" she cried, joy catching at her voice, "O! it is the dawn!"<sup>1</sup>

The London street scenes in *Dr Jekyll* admirably accord with the weird spirit of the tale. There is one effect of east wind which Dickens has also presented in his own way; and the disparity between the points of view of these two masters of description is worth notice. Mr Utterson goes to visit Dr Jekyll, and—

It was a wild, cold, seasonable night of March, with

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Prince Otto*.

a pale moon, lying on her back as though the wind had tilted her, and a flying wrack of the most diaphanous and lawny texture. The wind made talking difficult, and flecked the blood into the face. It seemed to have swept the streets unusually bare of passengers, besides ; for Mr Utterson thought he had never seen that part of London so deserted. He could have wished it otherwise ; never in his life had he been conscious of so sharp a wish to see and touch his fellow-creatures ; for, struggle as he might, there was borne in upon his mind a crushing anticipation of calamity. The square, when they got there, was all full of wind and dust, and the thin trees in the garden were lashing themselves along the railing.<sup>1</sup>

There is a menace in the air, too, in the opening of Chapter xii. Book I. in *Our Mutual Friend* :—

It was not summer yet, but spring ; and it was not gentle spring ethereally mild, as in Thomson's Seasons, but nipping spring with an easterly wind, as in Johnson's, Jackson's, Dickson's, Smith's, and Jones's Seasons. The grating wind sawed rather than blew ; and as it sawed the sawdust whirled about the sawpit. Every street was a sawpit, and there were no top-sawyers ; every passenger was an under-sawyer, with the sawdust blinding him and choking him . . . The wind sawed, and the sawdust whirled. The shrubs

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.  
Written in 1886.

wrung their many hands, bemoaning that they had been over-persuaded by the sun to bud ; the young leaves pined ; the sparrows repented of their early marriages, like men and women ; the colours of the rainbow were discernible, not in floral spring, but in the faces of the people whom it nibbled and pinched . . .<sup>1</sup>

The just and subtle instinct of both artists leads them to select the particular kind of external circumstances, and the particular aspect of them, which chime, in some indefinable way, with the process of events. So in *The Master of Ballantrae*, in the great scene of the book, the duel by night :—

It was as he had said : there was no breath stirring ; a windless stricture of frost had bound the air ; and as we went forth in the shine of the candles, the blackness was like a roof over our heads. Never a word was said ; there was never a sound but the creaking of our steps along the frozen path. The cold of the night fell about me like a bucket of water ; I shook as I went with more than terror ; but my companions, bare-headed like myself, and fresh from the warm hall, appeared not even conscious of the change.

“Here is the place,” said the Master. “Set down the candles.”

I did as he bid me, and presently the flames went up, as steady as in a chamber, in the midst of the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*.



frosted trees, and I beheld these two brothers take their places.<sup>1</sup>

And so in *The Wrecker*,<sup>2</sup> when the schooner *Norah Creina*, driven by the gale, draws near the end of her voyage, and the crew of wreckers at last behold their prize :—

Little by little, in that white waste of water, I began to make out a quarter where the whiteness appeared more condensed : the sky above was whitish likewise, and misty like a squall ; and little by little there thrilled upon my ears a note deeper and more terrible than the yelling of the gale—the long thundering roll of breakers. Nares wiped his night-glass on his sleeve and passed it to me, motioning, as he did so, with his hand. An endless wilderness of raging billows came and went and danced in the circle of the glass ; now and then a pale corner of sky, or the strong line of the horizon rugged with the heads of waves ; and then of a sudden—come and gone ere I could fix it, with a swallow's swiftness—one glimpse of what we had come so far and paid so dear to see ; the masts and rigging of a brig pencilled on heaven, with an ensign streaming at the main, and the ragged ribbons of a topsail thrashing from the yard. Again and again, with toilful searching, I recalled that apparition. There was no sign of any land ; the wreck stood between sea and sky, a thing the most isolated I had ever viewed ; but

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *The Master of Ballantrae*, written in 1888-89.

<sup>2</sup> Written in 1889-91.

as we drew nearer, I perceived her to be defended by a line of breakers which drew off on either hand, and marked, indeed, the nearest segment of the reef. Heavy spray hung over them like a smoke, some hundred feet into the air; and the sound of their consecutive explosions rolled like a cannonade.

And, for a last illustration, take the direct, romantic opening to *The Beach of Falesá*<sup>1</sup>:—

I saw that island first when it was neither night nor morning. The moon was to the west, setting, but still broad and bright. To the east, and right amidships of the dawn, which was all pink, the daystar sparkled like a diamond. The land breeze blew in our faces, and smelt strong of wild lime and vanilla: other things besides, but these were the most plain; and the chill of it set me sneezing. I should say I had been for years on a low island near the line, living for the most part solitary among natives. Here was a fresh experience: even the tongue would be quite strange to me; and the look of those woods and mountains, and the rare smell of them, renewed my blood.<sup>2</sup>

Stevenson had a rare perception of romantic landscape; the beauty of the tangible world was set in his heart in the beginning, and to the end he rejoiced in it.

<sup>1</sup> Written in 1891.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. S., *Island Nights' Entertainments*.

## IX.

## HIS STYLE.

For the foundation of style is nothing else but this : a fixed determination in any man to reveal the true nature of his thought as distinguished, and contra-distinguished, from the thoughts of all others his fellow-men, be they alive or dead. Not one of these shares fully the ideas that are man's ; wherefore must he, at the beginning, be content to stand utterly alone in the world, until out of himself he can spin those threads which shall one day serve to swing him back into the thoughts of his kind. O awful isolation, awful incubation ! O perilous flight through the void air !

That is the meaning of style.—C. F. KEARY.

There is a writer called Mr Robert Louis Stevenson, who makes most delicate inlay-work in black and white, and files out to the fraction of a hair.—RUDYARD KIPLING, *Black Jack*.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON was the very type of the aristocrat—the ragged aristocrat—of letters. The crown and flower of an old tradition, a tradition of sound scholarship, and good talk, and fastidious craftsmanship, a tradition of wine and song and story, the evolution of Stevenson the writer, in accordance with the common law, left him intensely preoccupied with

the study of form, as distinct—in so far as it may be distinguished—from substance. He was born with the single, imperious desire to make something in words. What that something should consist of, was of a secondary importance; and, indeed, when this versatile maker came to the end of his life he left examples of nearly every *genre* known to polite literature. But, at first, those were studies of form that absorbed his energies; and the direction of those studies is highly characteristic of the man. His choice of models and method of work are among the stock illustrations of contemporary criticism.

It was not so much that I wished to be an author [he says] (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed that I would learn to write . . . Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts. I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire, and to Obermann. That [he

adds, with finality], like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way.<sup>1</sup>

Well, it was undoubtedly the way, and the only way, for Stevenson, since he deliberately elected to become a perfect writer before he could, in the nature of things, have anything particular to say. Other writers, such as Charles Dickens and Sir Walter, began by amassing material, and afterwards they learned to shape it. But Stevenson preferred to carve all his patterns and prepare his moulds; and then he collected the raw stuff, and slowly poured it into a beautiful ready-made receptacle. It does not seem to matter which way you go about the business; only, there are more ways than the one, after all. And here there falls to be made another distinction: that, while the course of gymnastic laid down by Stevenson so positively may be a training essential to the man of letters, as such; yet, the story-teller stands upon a slightly different footing. For, while the student, the critic, and the essayist, dealing largely with abstractions, may properly discourse of the things of their knowledge in terms of the study, the teller of tales, who deals directly with

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

reality, must tell of life in the dialect of life. So long as the novelist express his meaning clearly and cleanly, the result—if he care to know it—will be literature. Now Stevenson, discoursing of flesh and blood and of actual, momentous experience, sets forth his tale in terms of the study. He is never satisfied until his least phrase is expressed in words which, irrespective of the main design of the piece, shall connote and suggest the utmost value of association or suggestion of which it is capable. It is possible to conceive of the main relation to the story of phrase or paragraph being taken away, and the structure still standing, alone and self-sufficient, like a costume of brocade divested by its wearer.

But, when we take, for an instance on the other side, the case of old Dumas, as a master of narrative art, the idea of such an operation performed upon the works of Alexander is totally inconceivable. In order to present his theme with the greatest possible directness and vigour, he has reduced all expression to a naked, athletic simplicity. And so, if there be a criticism to offer upon Stevenson's magnificent style, it is a negative objection, and cavils doubtfully of a lack of simplicity. I say, if there be, advisedly; for, to a man of Stevenson's temperament, no other expression were adequate or possible; he

(/ painted as he saw; and to deprecate his style, is to find fault with Stevenson as God made him, with the artist as his most earnest toil improved his natural gifts. And, if his purely narrative works lose, considered from one point of view, from a superfluity of beautiful vesture, looked at from another, the same quality adds vastly to the pleasure of their perusal. It is only upon general grounds that we may take exception; for a perfect and sufficient rule for the artist has never yet been established, during immemorial centuries; nor may Robert Louis Stevenson go down to posterity as the exponent of the one infallible method.

Nevertheless, his influence upon the writers of his generation is both active and salutary. Even the journalist is affected; and there is scarce a newspaper of repute but unconsciously pays its daily tribute to the aristocracy of letters, in a picked word here and there, or the turn of a phrase, which were first legitimatised by Stevenson. Generously gifted, not only with a fine sense and love of words, of their colour and value but, with the faculty of heroic industry, Stevenson (in the famous phrase) wrote like an angel.

Consider his many volumes, in all their variety; and a hundred different harmonies, ingeni-

ous rhythms, nimble combinations and subtle contrasts of colour, apt and witty epithets, chime in the memory :—

Look at one of your industrious fellows for a moment, I beseech you . . . Either he absents himself entirely from all fellowship, and lives a recluse in a garret, *with carpet slippers and a leaden inkpot* ; or he comes among people swiftly and bitterly, in a contraction of his whole nervous system, to discharge some temper before he returns to work.<sup>1</sup>

The victim begins to shrink spiritually ; he develops a fancy for parlours with a regulated temperature, and takes his morality on the principle of tin shoes and tepid milk. The care of one important body or soul becomes so engrossing, that all the noises of the outer world begin to come thin and faint into the parlour with the regulated temperature ; and *the tin shoes go equably forward over blood and rain.*<sup>2</sup>

“It is true,” replied Vandeleur. “I have hunted most things, *from men and women down to mosquitoes ; I have dived for coral ; I have followed both whales and tigers ; and a diamond is the tallest quarry of the lot.*”<sup>3</sup>

A little before *sundown in an open place with a stream, and set about with barbarous mountains*, Ballantrae threw down his pack. “I will go no farther,” said he, and bade me light the fire, *damning my blood in terms not proper for a chairman.*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Virginibus Puerisque*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> R. L. S., *New Arabian Nights*.

<sup>4</sup> R. L. S., *Master of Ballantrae*.



The browsers, the biters, the barkers, the hairy coats of field and forest, the squirrel in the oak, the thousand-footed creeper in the dust, as they share with us the gift of life, share with us the love of the ideal . . . Even while they look, even while they repent, *the foot of man treads them by thousands in the dust, the yelping hounds burst upon their trail, the bullet speeds, the knives are heating in the den of the vivisectionist ; or the dew falls, and the generation of a day is blotted out.*<sup>1</sup>

|| By means of the artful juxtaposition of words, these phrases I have italicised (and there are many hundreds more, for Stevenson wrought his web with prodigal magnificence) reflect, like crystals, beams and colours from all sorts of moving images, from the dust beneath our feet, to the vault of heaven and remotest constellations. Out of his studies in the English classics, Stevenson taught his generation new lessons in the plastic qualities of prose diction.<sup>2</sup>

And consider the talk of the men and women

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Later Essays*.

<sup>2</sup> In this connection, it is curious to recall a passage in Ben Jonson's *Timber or Discoveries*, &c.: "What a deal of cold business doth a man mis-spend the better part of life in ! in scattering compliments, tendering visits, gathering and venting news, following feasts and plays, making a little winter-love in a dark corner." This was read aloud to Stevenson by a friend, who asked him when he had written it ; whereupon Stevenson, in all good faith, protested that he had wholly forgotten the passage, and desired to know where in his works it occurred.

in his books; it is not only appropriate but inspired. Recall, for instance, the conversation of the pirates in *Treasure Island*. Piracy is a black, revolting business in reality (compare, for example, Stevenson's own account of the Teach affair in *The Master of Ballantrae*); and yet, while the talk of these romantic scoundrels is nothing else but quintessential piracy, it remains wholly delightful. That is the privilege of true romantic art—to seize and present the essential element in things which makes for delight. So in all his books: this Prometheus has stolen fire from heaven and gifted his creations with the gift of tongues. It is upon record that he was himself a chief among talkers, as befitted a scion of Old Scotland's aristocracy of wit. And did he not write the essay on *Talk and Talkers*<sup>1</sup>? an achievement of its kind. And Stevenson, like Thackeray, owns, not only the distinction of an executant but, the mastery of dialogue, clean, athletic, eloquent, witty, and picturesque. //

But Stevenson's most notable achievements as an executant were, perhaps, his Dedications. It is upon record that Thomas Stevenson, when all books failed him, as books will fail us all at times, would take down the volumes of his

<sup>1</sup> R. L. S., *Memories and Portraits*.

son and read the Dedications therein. These, at least, never, to the last day of his life, failed to give him the same pleasure. Since Ben Jonson wrote, there have been no better examples of this form of composition, made up, as the perfect Dedication must be, of tact, delicacy, eloquence, and cunning craftsmanship.

Take *Virginibus Puerisque*, and read the first (and, perhaps—who can say?—the best) of the many Stevensonian Dedications, beginning:—

*MY DEAR WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY, We are all busy in this world building Towers of Babel; and the child of our imaginations is always a changeling when it comes from nurse. This not only true in the greatest, as of wars and folios, but in the least also, like the trifling volume in your hand . . .*

And:—

*Times change, opinions vary to their opposite, and still this world appears a brave gymnasium, full of sea-bathing, and horse-exercise, and bracing, manly virtues; and what can be more encouraging than to find the friend who was welcome at one age, still welcome at another? Our affections and beliefs are wiser than we; the best that is in us is better than we can understand; for it is grounded beyond experience, and guides us, blindfold but safe, from one age to another.*

Or the Dedication of *The Merry Men*, dated

from the author's house, Skerryvore, in Bournemouth:—

| | *To your name, if I wrote on brass, I could add nothing; it has already been written higher than I could dream to reach, by a strong and dear hand; and if I now dedicate to you these tales, it is not as the writer who brings you his work, but as the friend who would remind you of his affection.*

Or the Dedication of *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, to Sidney Colvin, which is a little rhapsody in praise of friendship, finished, elegant; or, prefixed to *The Master of Ballantrae*:—

*A dedication from a great way off: written by the lone shores of a subtropical island near upon ten thousand miles from Boscombe Chine and Manor: scenes which rise before me as I write, along with the faces and voices of my friends.*

And, last of all, take the Dedication of *Catriona*, To Charles Baxter, *Writer to the Signet*, written at Vailima, Upolu, Samoa, 1892 (two years before the author's death), ending thus:—

*You are still—as when first I saw, as when I last addressed you—in the venerable city which I must always think of as my home. And I have come so far; and the sights and thoughts of my youth pursue me; and I see like a vision the youth of my father,*

rich inheritance, followed the ancient habit of his race, learned his elements in old Edina, changing then before his eyes to the Edinburgh we know, and went to France and learned what he might of an astute nation, and returned to Scotland, and again went forth and wandered the earth, and settled at length in an island of the far seas, and became (they say) a kind of feudal chieftain, and died there, leaving behind him a monument to the honour of his native city, which he loved.

And as Stevenson was the last expression of the old Scottish aristocracy of letters which had its home in Edinburgh for many generations, so the monument of his works is the cenotaph of that polite, illustrious society. A born artist, self-conscious to his finger-tips, witty, sensitive, sardonically humorous, endowed with a subtle insight and inheriting an incomparable faculty of craftsmanship, he loved art and letters, metaphysic and talk, and all the lusty gifts and magnificent appearances of life, with his whole heart. Of the passion of love he seems to have conceived imperfectly and partially, until he drew towards the end of his life, when—it seems—he came near to beholding some image of the true Eros. Constantly afflicted with ill-health, a fighting spirit of indomitable courage

## X.

## EPILOGUE.

Madam Life's a piece in bloom  
 Death goes dogging everywhere :  
 She's the tenant of the room,  
 He's the ruffian on the stair.

You shall see her as a friend,  
 You shall bilk him once and twice ;  
 But he'll trap you in the end,  
 And he'll stick you for her price.

With his kneebones at your chest,  
 And his knuckles in your throat,  
 You would reason—plead—protest !  
 Clutching at her petticoat ;

But she's heard it all before,  
 Well she knows you've had your fun,  
 Gingerly she gains the door,  
 And your little job is done.

—W. E. HENLEY, *Echoes*.

DESTINY is the last word in the life of every man. None may escape the thousand inherited impulses that mingle in his blood, nor avoid the irresistible influences of the time and place and society into which he is born. And Robert Louis Stevenson, the last, as I have tried to show, of a long tradition, the last heir to a

rich inheritance, followed the ancient habit of his race, learned his elements in old Edina, changing then before his eyes to the Edinburgh we know, and went to France and learned what he might of an astute nation, and returned to Scotland, and again went forth and wandered the earth, and settled at length in an island of the far seas, and became (they say) a kind of feudal chieftain, and died there, leaving behind him a monument to the honour of his native city, which he loved.

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carried him triumphantly through troubles and incredible labours, until, in middle age, we see him (in his *Vailima Letters*) desperately and cheerfully toiling for reasons (apparently) like to those which compelled Sir Walter Scott to his pathetic sacrifice, and labouring with a heroism which brings to mind his august elder's demeanour in the last tragic scenes of his life.

But, with all Stevenson's brilliant endowment and all his amazing cleverness, the sane, serenely humorous vision of the great masters is denied him. Stevenson was no "natural force let loose." Rather was he the very type of the athlete in letters, with all his powers cultivated to their utmost, informed with a rare and brave spirit, running—with many flourishes and tricks of pace—the race that was set before him with all his might.

The portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson has been drawn in little by a stronger hand than mine, in the lines at the beginning of this volume. Therein you shall behold the picture of a man gifted with an endowment exquisite yet strangely incomplete, who won great renown in his brief lifetime as a beautiful and refined artist, an admirable executant.



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